Encompassing the Sacrifice: On the Narrative Construction of the Significant Past in the Sanskrit Mahābhārata

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The Mahābhārata has, for millennia, been pivotal to processes of the construction of ideas of the cosmic and social past in South Asia. The text has also been of critical importance in establishing connections between Vedic and post-Vedic cosmic and social self-understandings. The key theoretical issue that underlies both these roles is of the nature of the relationship between narrative and the construction of forms of significant social knowledge in human social groups. The investigation of this relationship presents challenges to received conceptions of culture, history and structure within the academic disciplines of both Anthropology and History. This study explores the complex orientation to the past evident in the Sanskrit Mahābhārata. It also addresses the relationship between ideas of the past and issues of self-presentation in the text. I argue that the text constitutes itself as a ‘reflective’ or ‘theoretical’ technology in early South Asian religious discourse and that this strategy is intimately related to antecedent Vedic forms of knowledge and practice. I argue that this understanding of the text can shed light on wider processes in the formation and consolidation of Sanskrit knowledge systems in early South Asia. I also suggest that the example of the Mahābhārata can help refine more general theoretical orientations to the relationship between narrative, history and culture.

History, culture, social memory and narrative

‘A world is a given ensemble of possibilities, a given modality.’

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1 A. Coomaraswamy, ‘Vedic Exemplarism,’ *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 1, 1 (1936): 45. I would like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council for their financial support of my doctoral research and additional support for a period of study at the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Pune. I would also like to thank the British Academy for funding my attendance at the *Cultural Memory and Cultures in Transition* conference at Vilnius University (May, 2006). I would further like to thank Cardiff University for supporting a period of research leave in Kerala. Additionally, I would also like to thank the following individuals; Nick Allen, Brian Black, Simon
This paper examines the complex interrelationship of forms of communicative exchange and the construction of the shared past in early South Asia. In particular, I focus upon the role of the Sanskrit Mahābhārata in the construction of ideas of the cosmic and social past and the relation of those ideas to certain Vedic cosmic and social self-understandings. Marshall Sahlins provides a dramatic expression of the rationale for such an investigation:

The problem now is to explode the concept of history by the anthropological experience of culture [...]. We thus multiply our conceptions of history by the diversity of structures.2

The difficulty with this bold formulation is its operational categories: Sahlins here opposes ‘history’ to both ‘culture’ and ‘structure’ and thus constructs an ‘ethno-history’ that is fundamentally flawed in its reliance on an abstract notion of an authorial cultural structure.3 Sahlins provided what was without doubt a programmatic statement when he asserted that “history is culturally ordered, differently so in different societies”4 but the formulation is unhelpful if it is allied to a misconception of the epistemological status of the concept of ‘culture’ as anything other than a scholarly tool. The anthropological experience of ‘culture’ has, over the last few decades, been ‘exploded’ quite as successfully as the normative conception of history.5

It is unfortunate, then, that the assumption of an authorial ‘culture’ is prominent in characterisations of the entire field of comparative historiography.6

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There is no human culture without a constitutive element of common memory [...]. “History” in this fundamental and anthropologically universal sense is a culture’s interpretive recollection of the past serving as a means to orient the present.7

The very examination of processes of historical self-fashioning implicitly destabilises, however, the holistic categories that circulate in the work of both Sahlins and Rüsen. In this paper, I will analyse the Mahābhārata, not as a reflection of a given cultural ‘order’ (or as a part of a distinctive South Asian ‘historiography’), but rather as a narrative construction of the significant past with a particular social and religious, as well as exegetical, agenda. I will demonstrate how the Sanskrit Mahābhārata both employs and adapts pre-existing modes of religious thought and practice in the construction of the past and of social and cosmic action. I will examine the Mahābhārata as a text which constructs a past ‘whose essential purpose is to debate other pasts’8 and, more than this, other, primarily Vedic, texts and their ideas of social

7 J. Rüsen, ‘Some Theoretical Approaches to Intercultural Comparative Historiography,’ History and Theory 35, 4, Theme Issue: Chinese Historiography in Comparative Perspective (1996): 5–22. Rüsen exhibits a combination of useful insight (into the multiple domains in which a given conception of the past is active and relevant) with valuable, but ultimately frustrating, generalisation (as in the above quotation). Indeed, if one had to characterise the relevant ‘anthropological universal’ then it is far better, in my view, to consider as universal the elaboration of both successive, and competing, reflective ‘technologies’ or ‘practices’ in human social groups. My research explores the interface between two such ‘technologies’ in early South Asia, Veda and Mahābhārata. Rüsen usefully argues that a certain mode of historical consciousness, namely the ‘western’ mode, has an ‘unreflected meta-status’ in comparative analyses. One must, however, be wary of generalisation even in this regard. Linda Orr explores the genre typologies and literary conventions of ‘Western’ history writing at some length in her ‘The Revenge of Literature: A History of History’ (New Literary History 18 (1986–87): 1–47). A more subtle approach than Rüsen’s is adopted by Christian Meier in his ‘Die Entstehung der Historie,’ in Geschichte: Ereignis und Erzählung, Poetik und Hermeneutik V, ed. R. Koselleck and W. Stempel (Munich, 1975), p. 256: ‘Es scheint an der Zeit, eine in größerem Stil vergleichende Betrachtung der verschiedenen Formen anzustellen, in denen in den verschiedenen Kulturen und Gesellschaften historische Fragen, Betrachtungsweisen, Interessen mit den Problemen, Perspektiven und Bedürfnissen, mit bestimmten Weisen des Handelns, der Veränderung, der Erwartungen und mit bestimmten Struktueigentümlichkeiten der gesellschaft korrelieren’ [It seems to me time to install an elaborated comparative view of the different forms, within which the different cultures and societies correlate historical questions, world-views, and interests with certain ways of activity, of change, of expectation, and with certain structural peculiarities of society].

8 A. Appadurai, ‘The Past as a Scarce Resource,’ 202. Appadurai describes this past as a ‘third kind of past’ building on Geertz’s conception of a ritual and a non-ritual past. I would argue that this third kind of past theoretically destabilises the other two. Tambiah’s work is instructive here, he comments of Thai and Buddhist history that it is ‘difficult or even impossible […] to separate continuities from transformations. He also suggests that ‘deep seated dialectical tensions can be ‘continuities’ (see World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand Against a Historical Background, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977, 528 and 517). We will take up this point below in relation to the overly polarised approach taken by Heesterman in his construction of contrasting ‘Sacrificial’ and ‘Ritual’ orders in the Vedic corpus (see his The Broken World of Sacrifice: An Essay in Ancient Indian Ritual, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).
and cosmic process. Indeed, my arguments will take the ‘codification of historical memory’ as an activity which is always embroiled in a great variety of wider social, philosophical and theological issues. This orientation to history, and its relation to forms of narrative discourse, requires, however, further theoretical elucidation.

If Anthropology has been overly dominated by the concept of the cultural ‘whole,’ then historical studies have been dominated by an idea of objective historical significance based on simplistic models of cause and effect. The limitations of these models have been known for some time. Ilse Bulhof comments of Dilthey:

[He] […] added to this theory of objective historical significance the notion that an event had first to be subjectively experienced as significant by the community before it could have an objective effect on later history. 10

Dilthey’s insight is worthy of more detailed theoretical development than it has currently received. 11 He suggests here that an event must be constituted as significant before it may have an effect. It follows from this that in order for an event to be experienced or constituted as significant, it must do so in a particular medium, that is to say, it must enter the multi-media domain of ‘social memory.’ 12 If this is the case, then our key task is to refine our orientations to the media in which ideas of the past take shape. A second task that is of critical importance is the analysis of social memory in relation to other forms of contextually related activity. This paper addresses the first of these tasks by approaching the Mahābhārata in the theoretical context of the exploration of the roles and functions of narrative activity in human social groups. It addresses the second task by means of an exploration of the inter-textual relations between the Mahābhārata and the Vedic corpus.

This strategy of analysis allows us to address the important question ‘how do social groups constitute events as significant and in relationship to what presuppositions and what other forms of discourse or practice?’ In this paper, I will limit my analyses to the particular role of Sanskrit narrative discourse in the answering of the above question in an early South Asian context. I will argue, specifically, that

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12 By the designation ‘social memory’ I refer to what Richard Werbner has called ‘memory as public practice,’ by which he refers to any form of shared discourse about the past that is considered to be of fundamental importance to the state of both the present and the future in a given social context. Richard Werbner (ed.), Memory and the Postcolony, Introduction: Beyond Oblivion: Confronting Memory Crisis, London: Zed Books, 1998, 1.
the Mahābhārata’s construction of the significant past is a form of narrative commentary on antecedent forms of early South Asian religious discourse.  

This contention is based upon a very specific understanding of narrative activity as a critical means for both the transmission and adaptation of ideas in human social groups. R.B. Nair, in her Narrative Gravity, suggests that ‘narrative […] is a structure that introduces the question ‘why?’ and the connective ‘because’ into the world.’ Nair’s compellingly clear characterisation of narrative activity suggests that, as a mode of expression, narrative is not optionally commentarial but rather constitutively so. I will build on Nair’s characterisation of narrative discourse and argue that narrative is capable of functioning as a form of ‘theory.’ By this, I mean that it presents, implicitly or explicitly, particular hypotheses about phenomena that are either in the world or within its own discourse and further presents a paradigm to explain, or encourage further interpretation of, these phenomena. In this paper, I will argue for an understanding of the Sanskrit Mahābhārata as an application of narrative theory in early South Asian religious discourse. The particular context in which I wish to explore these theoretical capacities is that of the construction and adaptation of the cosmic and social past. This analysis, of the narrative construction of the past, can then take its place as part of a wider engagement with strategies and conflicts in ‘the management of meanings,’ and the role of Sanskrit knowledge systems, in early South Asia. Arjun Appadurai suggests, I think rightly, that this form of approach should ‘precede analysis of those substantive and intrinsic values over which the competition is apparently taking place.’

13 ‘Early South Asian Religious Discourse’ should minimally be taken to refer to the range of relevant edited and unedited Sanskrit, Pāli, Prākrit and proto-Vernacular sources to which we have access in the major research libraries and which are tentatively dated within the period that extends from the first millennium B.C.E. to the first millennium C.E., it should maximally be taken to refer to the abstract notion of the total range of data for that period. This includes epigraphic, numismatic and material culture sources. I am not, of course, claiming acquaintance with either the whole of the former or even the competence to address the latter, but am rather arguing for the capacity for the Sanskrit Mahābhārata, as a consequence of the potentialities of its narrative structure and thematic and exegetical interrelationships, to address and comment upon materials within this notional totality. This paper is specifically concerned with the Mahābhārata’s relation to the Vedic corpus.

14 The realisation of the salience of narrative studies for human social and cognitive development and the reciprocal application of cognitivist approaches in the Humanities has resulted in a flurry of recent publications. From the work of specialists in English such as R.B. Nair’s Narrative Gravity (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), and Mark Turner’s The Literary Mind (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), to the work of Evolutionary Anthropologists such as M. Tomasello’s The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

15 R.B. Nair, Narrative Gravity, 344.

16 This is an extension of Nair’s definition of the function of stories ‘they present particular hypotheses about phenomena in the world and present a paradigm to explain them,’ see Narrative Gravity, 343.

This paper, then, pays close attention to the manner and means of the narrative construction of the past in the Sanskrit Mahābhārata in relation to wider forms of thought and action in early South Asia. In this way, the fundamental insight of Durkheim and Mauss into the historicity of classificatory forms, of rationalities as social institutions, can be fruitfully combined with an awareness of the impact of ongoing reflexive evaluation of those institutions and rationalities by interested (and, more often than not, politicised) parties. The objects of our analysis are, then, ‘economies’ of discursive practice ‘with intrinsic technologies, necessities of operation, tactics they employ, and effects they transmit.’ The formulation of Coomaraswamy with which this paper began can then be subjected to an exegetical strategy, familiar to Vedāntists, in which the term ‘modality’ ‘empirically eviscerates’ reified conceptions of ‘world’ and, by extension, ‘culture.’ In this way, my analyses will contribute to the ongoing refinement of scholarly orientations to the construction and adaptation of notions of the shared past in human social groups.

**Exegetical encompassment and the significant past in the Sanskrit Mahābhārata**

This paper will not rehearse the recidivist assumption of a South Asia without meaningful historical self-awareness. Sheldon Pollock’s comment is instructive in this regard:

> The ‘history’ that forms the yardstick of India’s inadequacy, then, may not be an altogether useful measure, no better than the stories that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries dreamed

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18 See E. Durkheim and M. Mauss, ‘De Quelques Formes Primitives de Classification,’ *Année Sociologique* 6 (1903): 1–72. For a thorough and insightful study of this text, which significantly problematises the critique of Durkheim and Mauss’ work by Joseph Needham (in his translation of the above work: *Primitive Classification*, London, 1963) see N. Allen, *Categories and Classifications: Maussian Reflections on the Social* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000). In particular, Allen suggests that the ongoing reflexive adjustment of ideas of natural and social order in social groups is anticipated by Durkheim and Mauss: ‘When introducing the notion of segmentation, they propose that once a classification of nature has come into being, it can act back on (ragir sur) its cause […] and contribute to modifying it’ (p. 52). This is of fundamental importance for our orientation to the *Mahābhārata* in early South Asia.


21 Indifference to the past is, in any case, belied in the *Mahābhārata* by an index of fame which is precisely a measure of the extent to which a given being and their actions have been subject to a process of ‘narrativisation.’ For example, in the Āraṇyakaparvan of the *Mahābhārata*, in the context of the narrations of Mārkandeya, we find the narrative of Indradyumna, a royal sage who falls from heaven and whose return is predicated on the discovery of a being who remembers him. After visiting a trail of progressively more ancient beings it is the tortoise Akūpāra who finally recognises him. See *Mbh* 3.191.
to be history. Upon reflection we find ourselves, as we so often and no doubt inevitably have done, looking vainly in ancient India for a category constructed in modern Europe, and a self-deluding category at that.  

Instead, having addressed some of my core theoretical concerns, I will suggest that the construction of the significant past in the Sanskrit Mahābhārata is marked by a sustained, deliberate, and creative engagement with Vedic religious and social self-understandings. In this way, I intend to show how ‘the destiny of the Veda’ is not just ‘a process of abstraction’ but also a process of concretisation. This is achieved, in the Mahābhārata, by means of narratives which historically contextualise Vedic sacrificial activity as part of a deliberate exegetical agenda. The goal of this agenda is to assume both the creative capacities and the exalted status of the Vedas.  

22 S. Pollock, ‘Mīmāṃsā and the Problem of History in Traditional India,’ *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109, 4 (1989): 605. This is not to discount Pollock’s valuable analysis of the impact of Mīmāṃsāic discourse on modes of approach to the past in early South Asia. I think this impact has, however, been overstated in this and other works such as that of R.W. Perret in his ‘History, Time and Knowledge in Ancient India,’ *History and Theory* 38, 3 (1999): 307–21. The difficulty with the latter paper is that it radically underestimates the significance of arthavādī, itihāsīc discourse, and universalises trends in philosophic exegesis as an explanation for ‘ancient Indian ahistoricity.’ There is also a tendency in this paper to underestimate the instrumentalism of classical South Asian epistemologies, which itself reflects the instrumentality of their Vedic antecedents. That is to say, the validity of a given form of knowledge tends, in early South Asia, to depend on the goal of its application. Pollock’s work is considerably more subtle in this regard, but the notion that ‘thinking about things historically, as constellations of contingencies […] became impossible’ in early South Asia cannot be accurate in relation to a literary corpus that includes the Mahābhārata as one of its most prominent works. Pollock’s emphasis on philosophical exegesis leads to an underestimation of the significance and content of alternate, and in this case narrative, modes of hermeneutic engagement with the Vedic corpus.


24 The work to which I did not have access until the completion of this paper was Laurie Patton’s *Bringing the Gods to Mind*. This work exhibits a wide range of parallels with my own orientation to the transformation and transcreation of Vedic knowledge in subsequent South Asian religious discourse. The work focuses, in particular, on the development of mantric ‘thinking,’ her central aim, of an examination of the ‘wider context of metonymical thinking and the expansion of the Vedic associative imagination’ could equally well stand as a summary of my analytic goals in relation to the Mahābhārata. See *Bringing the Gods to Mind: Mantra and Ritual in Early Indian Sacrifice*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005, 30. The text as a whole seems to see the polysemy of the Vedic mantras as the enduring feature, and key practical and cognitive resource, of the Vedic knowledge system. This polysemy acts, for Patton, as a reservoir for metonymic extension. I see, rather, that it is the cross application of core competencies and the fulfilment of core functions that is the enduring feature of Vedic and para-Vedic religious discourse. In this view ‘internalization’ and ‘externalization’ of the Vedic ritual system (be this in the context of Upanisadīc speculation or Dharmaśāstraic codification) are simply different exegetical manoeuvres on a single hermeneutic continuum (for classic expressions of the ‘interiorization of the sacrifice’ hypothesis in early South Asian religious discourse see Chapter Two ‘Renoncement et intériorisation du sacrifice,’ in M. Biardeau and C. Malamoud, *Le Sacrifice dans L’Inde Ancienne* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1976), p. 57–80, and Chapter Two ‘Brahmin, Ritual and Renouncer’ of Heesterman’s *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship and Society* (Chicago: University of
way, the Mahābhārata restlessly pursues its own strategies of exegetical encompassment and creative self-aggrandizement. Laurie Patton elegantly summarises the matter, in a fashion which resonates with Nair’s orientation to narrative discourse, when she states:

There is value in taking a new approach which examines the uses of a particular mythical narrative to argue a point, and studies how such arguments have changed, even within the different stages of Vedic and post-Vedic religions themselves.25

I will suggest that the Mahābhārata seeks to discuss, ‘argue’ and narrate, a particular view of the cosmos and the significant past into being. I will further suggest that, in so doing, the text is self-consciously positioned as the medium par excellence for such an undertaking in a way that resonates very strongly with the creative capacities of the Vedic ritual order.

I will suggest, in particular, that the Mahābhārata engages in a ritually derived construction of time and text. This will allow me to demonstrate how the Mahābhārata functions as an application of ‘narrative theory’ in early South Asian religious discourse. Indeed, I will show how the foundations of time and text are deliberately interrelated, and sometimes conflated, within the Mahābhārata. I will also suggest that the narrative structure of the Mahābhārata itself provides a model for

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25 L. Patton, Myth as Argument, xx. The concept of myth, however, tends to stand as a holistic complement to the concept of culture with all the same ‘buried’ issues of compositional agency that I indicated in my introduction. The term ‘epic’ is also somewhat problematic. The notion of ‘primary epic’ has a considerable political history in the west that associates it with the origination of nation states and the heroic activities of kings. This is by no means wholly inappropriate to the Mahābhārata, but it involves one in a range of potential theoretical, and indeed even ideological, commitments that are in need of critical examination beyond the scope of the present work. Alf Hiltebeitel has begun such a critical consideration in his Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader’s Guide to the Education of the Dharma King (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), see esp. pp. 5–17. One of the more prominent theoretical ‘commitments’ which the use of the term epic can involve is the adoption of a trans-historical, trans-geographical canon of significant works. This canon links the Aeneid to the Mahābhārata and the Shah Namah to the Tain. Such connections remain under-theorised other than within the specific domain of Dumézilian studies of their common Indo-European heritage. It should be noted that Quint’s view of epic, following Frederic Jameson, as capable of transmitting ‘[…] an idea of narrative itself—carried through history by the […] genre,’ is one that resonates with our own approach to the Mahābhārata (See D. Quint, Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993, 15). In this paper, however, narrative has been selected as the basic unit of analysis. I define narrative as: A re-iterable, transferable expression of an event, or events, articulated through the establishment of one, or more, organisations of (intra-textual and extra-textual) space and time.
the narrative exploration of the significant past by readers and hearers of the text. I will commence my analyses, however, with the Mahābhārata’s discourse on creation and sovereignty.

A question of origins: churning the Sanskrit Mahābhārata

My analyses of the nature and function of the Mahābhārata’s construction of the significant past begin, then, at the very beginning; the foundation of ordered cosmic and social life. The Mahābhārata contains several such narrations but the text that has undoubtedly taken the firmest hold in South Asian religious life is the story of the churning of the ocean (the amṛtamanthana). This is the narrative of the competitive churning of the ocean by the Devas (the gods) and the Asuras (the anti-gods) to obtain the elixir of immortality, the amṛta, and to found a functional cosmic and social order. The tale is narrated in the first book of the Mahābhārata, the Ādiparvan. This version of the tale is the earliest extant version in Sanskrit literature of this particular creation-story:

The earlier tradition never mentioned a cosmos set in order by churning, which first coagulates the waters, then lends fabulous treasures and sets a new world order. The cosmogonic aspect of the Amṛtamanthana determined its outstanding impact on post-Vedic culture, which promoted it to the status of pivotal Genesis tradition.26

The narrative occurs as a part of a complex network of stories which require some elucidation: The main plot of the Mahābhārata, of the conflict over the royal succession between two groups of cousins, the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas, which culminates in a horrific war, is only one component of the text. This main plot is narrated by one Vaiśampāyana, a pupil of the text’s author Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa, to a King Janamejaya, who is a direct descendent of the eventual victors of the main Mahābhārata war, the Pāṇḍavas. The main plot of the Mahābhārata is narrated during the intervals of a great snake sacrifice (sarpa sattra) that king Janamejaya is holding. We come to know of this telling of the Mahābhārata by means of it being repeated by a professional storyteller by the name of Ugraśravas: Ugraśravas tells of both the circumstances and details of the Vaiśampāyana narration to a group of brāhmaṇas, led by one Śaunaka. These brāhmaṇas are themselves engaged in a great Vedic sacrifice (a sattra)27 in the Naimiṣa forest. The text thus has two major ‘encompassing’ narratives.28

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27 A sattra is an extended Vedic sacrifice that involves twelve or more days of the pressing of soma, an intoxicant central to Vedic ritual activity. It is, unusually for a Vedic ritual, one in which the performers of the rite do so for their own benefit rather than that of a sponsor. The sarpa sattra is, however, a wholly fictionalised form of Vedic rite to which we find no reference in the Vedic corpus.
As if this were not complicated enough, the amṛtamāntana is part of a narrative of a wager between two sisters Kadrū and Vinatā, and this story itself occurs within the narration of the tale of Āṣṭika, who is a brāhmaṇa who interrupts the snake sacrifice of King Janamejaya. The story of Āṣṭika is narrated to Śaunaka by Ugraśravas in response to Śaunaka’s request to hear of the circumstances of the snake sacrifice of King Janamejaya.29 Śaunaka specifically asks to hear of the churning of the amṛta, the nectar of immortality:

Śaunaka said:
How and where did the Devas churn (math) for the amṛta?
Where was that heroic and glorious king of horses born?30

A tale of ritual origins is thus narrated within an encompassing narrative of ritual action and in relation to a question concerning the particulars of another ritual. We thus find that, even in contextualising the tale of the churning of the ocean, there is a complex network of narratives, conversations, enquiries and ritual activities. Śaunaka’s question allows all of these activities to be focussed on the narrative exploration of the significant past at its most fundamental: the creation of a functional cosmic and social order.

The narrative of the amṛtamāntana itself is a simple one and occupies just over two adhyāyas (1.16–17). The story details the decision of Nārāyaṇa and Brahmā to aid the Devas in the churning of the ocean to obtain amṛta, the elixir of immortality. The ocean is churned with the vast Mt. Mandara. The tortoise king Akūpāra provides the foundation for the churning, while the Snake lord Vāsuki provides the cord which is to

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This violent and destructive rite, in which Janamejaya resolves to immolate the entire race of snakes (due to the murder of his father by one of their number), is, however, thoroughly in accord with the Heestermanic understanding of sacrifice as fundamentally concerned with oppositional relations of power and issues of the distribution of material goods and of life and death. Indeed, it reflects his characterisation of the original sattra as a rite for warriors performed for their own benefit (see The Inner Conflict of Tradition, 151, see, for a more general account, Chapter One ‘Sacrifice’ in The Broken World of Sacrifice). The diachronic dimension of his argument, of the passage from the agonistic sacrifice to the autistic ritual has however been overstated in Heesterman’s work, a point I will take up below (see note 56).

28 These encompassing narratives achieve, as we shall see, what Richard Bauman has defined as “the keying of a performance:” ‘[…] any message, which either explicitly or implicitly […] gives the receiver instructions or aids in his attempt to understand the messages.’ See R. Bauman, Verbal Art as Communication, Illinois: Waveland Press, 1977, 18 (quoting G. Bateson).

29 The proliferation of narrative levels in the Mahābhārata can be dizzying: In the Dronaparva (Mbh App. 1.8.1–267) we find, in addition to the two encompassing narratives, four further concurrent narrations, making a grand total of six narrative layers, the most I have observed in the Sanskrit text.

30 Mbh 1.15.4:
Śaunaka uvāca:
kathath tad amṛtan devair mathitāṁ kva ca śaṁsa me
yatra jajñe mahāvīryaḥ so śvārājo mahādyutīḥ
be wrapped around Mt. Mandara in order to facilitate the churning action. The Devas and the Asuras will pull on each end of the cord. The churning causes the sap (rasa/payas) of various trees and herbs to mix with the waters of the ocean which turns the waters to milk (payas/kśīra). Finally, despite the fact that the Devas tire, the relentless churning produces the sun, the moon, the goddess Śrī (sovereignty), the goddess Surā (liquor), the white steed, the celestial gem Kaustubha and the god Dhanvantari who carries a gourd full of amṛta. There is a scramble between the Devas and Asuras for the amṛta. Nārāyaṇa intervenes in female form to distract the Asuras. The Devas drink the amṛta. A vast battle between the two classes of divine being ensues. Nara and Nārāyaṇa enter the field on the side of the Devas. The Asuras are cast down into the bowels of the earth by means of the combination of Nara’s divine bow and Nārāyaṇa’s awesome discus, sudarśana. The Devas return Mt. Mandara to its original position and hide the amṛta. This marks the conclusion of the amṛtamanthana.

The amṛtamanthana provides an account of the origins of sacrificial action which also functions as a cosmogony and which is based upon the agonistic opposition of two classes of divine being, the asuras and devas. There is a consensus opinion in Vedic studies that the asura-deva conflict is, in its multiple re-tellings, a fundamentally creative opposition out of which a functional cosmos emerges from the inchoate primal creation. This reflects broader understandings of the creative role of ritual action in the Vedic corpus. Asko Parpola characterises Vedic ritual as:

[...] The instrument to provide the powerful potencies of the universe with strong resting places: it was necessary to prevent them from wandering about arbitrarily (which would mean infringement of cosmic norms and cause dangerous disorder).

In a more philosophical mode, B.K. Smith suggests:

The Vedic ritualists attempted to realise their epistemological constructs by ritually constructing the universe, heavens, the world, and society; a metaphysics was produced through the ritual activation of an epistemology.

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31 See: W. Norman Brown, ‘The Creation Myth of the Rig Veda,’ *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 62 (1942): 85–98; F.B.J. Kuiper ‘Cosmogony and Conception: A Query,’ *History of Religions* 10 (1970): 91–138. This opposition shifts to a conflict between divine and human beings in the Satapatha, Aitareya and Jaiminiya Brāhmaṇas (See SatBr 3.5.1.13–23, AitBr 6.34 and JaimBr 3.187–8). In these texts the competition for ritual ascendancy is between the Ādityas and Angirasas (in the context of the interpretation of the sādvyaskra soma sacrifice which is an explicitly competitive rite). Heesterman comments: ‘[...] sacrifice is not just concerned with conflict, it is conflict writ large. The Ādityas and Angirasas fought their battle through sacrifice [...] the ritual itself is replete with references to conflict [...] against this background it becomes understandable that even the harmless and peaceful fortnightly new and full moon vegetal sacrifices are characterised in the older brāhmaṇa texts as rivalling sacrifices (samṛta-yajña). We also hear of the ‘asura-killing capacity’ of the mortar and pestle (used in the soma rites) in the Maitrīya Samhitā (4.1.6:8.12) and the Kāṭhaka Samhitā (31.4:5.15);’ See J. Heesterman, *The Broken World of Sacrifice*, 40 and 241, n. 152. We will take up this, and other parallel creative oppositions, below.

It is clear, then, that the performance of Vedic ritual is by no means a trivial matter. The *amrтананtha* is a post-Vedic narrative which brings together a vast amount of this Vedic thinking on the function of ritual action. We will see that the *Mahābhārata*, as the text progresses, repeatedly engages with the notion of sacrificial churning or pressing. This is achieved primarily by locating churning activities in specific contexts in the significant past. The *Mahābhārata* is not, of course, a ritual manual or a ritual commentary; it is, however, among other things, a ritual history. By telling of specific ritual activities in the shared past, the text initiates a complex interpretive discourse on ritual activity that will come to encompass, as we shall see below, cosmogony, kingship and the origin and status of certain forms of empowered text. This discourse culminates in a claim by the *Mahābhārata* to a total encompassment of the Vedic ‘constructivist’ order. Before I proceed, however, to my analysis of this sequence of narrations concerning churning activities in the *Mahābhārata*, it is essential that certain key features of the Vedic knowledge system are elucidated. In particular, it is important that we gain a sense of the complex interrelationship of ritual and interpretive activity in the Vedic corpus.

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33 B.K. Smith, *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual and Religion*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998, 220. Asko Parpola summarises the matter very succinctly when he states of the Vedic ritual, ‘There is no order before it, thus the ‘order’ is product, failure of the foundation (pratiṣṭhā) does not infringe cosmic ‘norms’ it threatens the ritually maintained and derived cosmic fabric’ (Parpola, ‘On the Symbol Concept of the Vedic Ritualists.’ 150). This is strongly reflected in the *amrтананtha* narrative. Staal summarises the matter as follows: The Sacrifice can now be interpreted as one of the modes of human being which constitute being. This ontological interpretation enables us to see how it was (ontically, as Heidegger would say) that such importance was attached to the ritual act […] The transformation or consecration which is effected through sacrifice, is not a transformation from one being to another but the constitution of being itself. J.F. Staal, *Advaita and Neoplatonism: A Critical Study in Comparative Philosophy*, Madras: University of Madras, 1961, 67. There is a somewhat confusing deployment of the adjectives ontological and epistemological in scholarly analysis of Vedic ritual constructivism (Staal, as in the above for example, expresses himself in terms of being, whilst B.K. Smith uses both terms, but seems to favour analyses in terms of knowledge). This, I think, reflects a fundamental difficulty in applying these western philosophical designations in the context of the Vedic corpus. Indeed, I am not sure that this opposition can hold in the context of a constructivist account of the cosmos, that is to say it is knowledge of how to perform the ritual, and knowledge of the significances of the ritual (which is precisely an analogical competence, a competence in the comprehension of inter-referential features) that allows the ritual to have its ongoing constructive and integrative ontological impact. When Pollock says that ‘theory precedes practice’ in South Asia (in his ‘The Problem of History’) I would say, more specifically that epistemology, to an extent, precedes ontology in the Vedic ritual and conceptual order (although this would be better expressed as knowledge/desire precedes differentiated being in the Vedic ritual and conceptual order, with desire as minimally involving the knowledge of the desire for differentiation which itself must be regulated/corrected by ritual activity—such a formulation is, to my mind, more accurate and does not presuppose the radical separation of these two fields of philosophical interest, epistemology and ontology).

34 In this sense the text functions as a *mīmāṃsā*, an exegesis of Vedic text. This is in the pre-Upaniṣadic sense of the term discussed by both Patton and Kane. See L. Patton, *Myth as Argument*, 14, and P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1968–75, 5: 2, 1154.
B.K. Smith characterises the Vedic intellectual programme as one that centres on a particular sequence of interpretive relations:

Vedic philosophy results in a system of mutual resemblance between three hierarchically calibrated registers: 1) the scale of ritual performance [...], 2) the relative quality and realisation of the sacrificer’s earthly self and status [...] and 3) the hierarchical order of selves and worlds of the unseen spheres. 35

Awareness of these relations is dependent on a further Vedic concept, that of the bandhu or connection:

The term bandhu [...] has in the course of time been translated in various ways [...] the Petrograd dictionary, followed by Monier-Williams, translates it by (1) ‘connection, relation, association, respect, reference; (2) relative, kindred, cognate kinsmen [...]’.36

Gonda argues in his ‘Bandhu in the Brähmaṇas’ that the concept of the bandhu encompasses both the knowledge of interconnection and the impact or power of that knowledge:

Hence also the belief that there may exist a close relationship or correspondence between phenomenal reality or a province of the whole universe or a section made from it, for instance the sacrificial place, a mandala, a sacred place or building. All these are centres of power. 37

Ritual, in the Vedic conceptual order, is, as we have seen, the primary means of ordering the universe which naturally tends toward dysfunction. 38 The efficacy of the ritual act is dependent on an interpretive competency typified by an understanding of the bandhu, or connection, between different spheres of activity. 39 The success of the ritual act is thus dependent on both the practical and cognitive competency of its participants. This is reflected in accounts of the origin of the Vedic ritual system: Prajāpati in his distress at his dysfunctional creation ‘sees’ a ritual solution:

35 B.K. Smith, Reflections on Resemblance, 119.
37 J. Gonda, ‘Bandu,’ 5.
38 Dysfunction by either extremes of under-differentiation (jāmi) and self-consumption—as in Jaiminiya Brćhmana 1.117 where the creation is made up of undifferentiated cannibals consuming one another—or radical over-distinction (prthuk)—as in Pāñcaviśā Brćhmanā 21.2.1 where Prajāpati’s creations scatter in fear of being consumed by their creator.
39 Bandhu equations were often conceptualised as functioning on a number of levels: adhidevatam, with regard to the deities, adhyātmam, with regard to the self, adhiyajñam, with regard to the sacrifice (e.g. in the Śatapatha Brćhmanā 10.2.6.16/17/18 respectively), and also adhibhūta, pertaining to the natural order. The earliest identifications are found in the yajus formulae. For details see Parpola, ‘On the Symbol Concept of the Vedic Ritualists,’ 140ff. H. Oldenberg, Vorwissenschaftliche Wissenschaft, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1919, 110ff. S. Schayer, ‘Die Struktur der magischen Weltanschauung nach dem Atharva Veda und den Brćhmaṇa-Texten,’ Zeitschrift für Buddhismus 6 (1925): 267ff. J. Gonda, Vedic Literature, History of Indian Literature 1, 1, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrasowitz, 1975, 372ff.
He saw (i.e., discovered) the forty nine day sacrificial session. Thereupon this (creation) became separated (vyaavartata). Cows became cows, horses (became) horses, men (became) men, and wild animals (became) wild animals.  

Prajāpati is also himself made whole by the sacrifice, having fallen into pieces at the strain of the sacrificial act. In this way, ‘Prajāpati and the sacrifice bring each other into existence.’ Thus, in the Brāhmaṇa accounts of Prajāpati’s activities, the ritual agent is re-created as he creates. Put in another way, the macrocosmic establishment of order in the created world is reflected in a microcosmic re-establishment of the practitioner of the sacrifice as he engages in ritual activity. In this way, a close identification, or bandhu, is established between ritual agent and ritual output (the functional cosmos). This connection finds further expression in a deliberate blurring of the distinction between the cosmos and Prajāpati himself. Prajāpati is associated with the year and the whole, the all (sarva), of both space and time. I will examine, below, how this close identification between the ritual agent and the cosmos was to become constitutive of both early South Asian conceptions of sovereignty and certain forms of related religious discourse.

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40 Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa 24.11.2 (trans. Smith, Reflections, 63).
41 Satapatha Brāhmaṇa 7.1.2.11, Satapatha Brāhmaṇa 7.4.2.11 and 13.
42 B.K. Smith, Reflections, 68.
43 Satapatha Brāhmaṇa 1.6.3.35 and Jaininiya Brāhmaṇa 2.393: praiginalit eva sanvätsaraḥ ‘the year (is) Prajāpati.’ This is of course itself an example of a bandhu equation. The year is also described as the pratimā, copy or image, of Prajāpati in the Satapatha Brāhmaṇa (11.1.6.13). Such a description provides a conceptual foundation for symbolic manipulation that could very easily escape the ritual commentary into other forms of symbolic activity. For a detailed discussion of this passage see Parpola, ‘On the Symbol Concept of the Vedic Ritualists,’ 142. In the same article, Parpola emphasises the relation between the technical meaning of bandhu and its workaday meaning of ‘kin or relation:’ he suggests, developing Gonda’s perspective (in his ‘Bandhu in the Brāhmaṇa’), that this term indicates a connection that surpasses even the sense of genealogical relation and incorporates an ‘intense consciousness of unity’ (151). See also Satapatha Brāhmaṇa 6.2.2.3. As early as the Rg Veda, we find evidence of the centrality of forms of interpretive competence in early South Asian religious discourse: In one sūkta, the sages discover the ‘secret connections’ in their hearts (RV 10.129.4). In the Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (3.9.19–20) it is ‘by means of the heart that one knows the forms (of things),’ hṛdayena hi rūpāṇi jñānaḥ. This resonates with the celebrated Vedic conflict of Prajāpati and Mṛtyu in Jaininiya Brāhmaṇa (2.69–70), in which Prajāpati is victorious, not by force of arms, but rather by means of his interpretive competence (which is expressed in terms of superior counting knowledge). This itself parallels a notion of hyper-numeracy in the Mahābhārata which is a necessary pre-requisite for kingship, this competency is described as the akṣahṛdaya, the ‘heart of the dice’ (perhaps with something of a Vedic pun on both ‘eye’ and ‘syllable,’ akṣa and akṣara, see Mbh 2.51.03; 3.70.23; 3.78.15), and is very clearly related to the dicing component of the Vedic rājasūya rite of royal consecration. We can begin to discern a complex network of connections between the Rg Vedic, Brāhmaṇa and Mahābhārata material. These texts, taken together, perhaps also provide something of a conceptual foundation for the notion of sahṛdaya in later dramaturgical literature, the ‘person of heart’ who is ideally positioned to receive, and thus activate, dramatic performance, see R.E. Goodwin, The Playworld of Sanskrit Drama, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998.

44 Prajāpati’s own sovereignty is predicated on his having seen, and then performed, the agniṣṭoma—a soma sacrifice.
In the actions of Prajāpati, we can discern a basic schema in the Brāhmaṇas that is of considerable significance to our analyses of the Mahābhārata. The schema proceeds through creation, the dysfunction of the created forms, the intervention of a stabilising agent, the constitution of a stabilising practice, and the provisional establishment of an ordered cosmos.\(^{45}\) I will return to this schema repeatedly in the course of my analyses.

Building on this Vedic background, I will argue that the amṛtānanta is part of a broader movement in the text to establish itself as a narrative technology (an alternative ‘centre of power’ in Gonda’s terms) for the ongoing creation and re-creation of a functional cosmos. This strategy necessitates the assumption of both the functions of the Vedic ritual and the attendant interpretive competencies typified by the bandhus of the Brāhmaṇas. This is the primary sense in which I describe the Mahābhārata as attempting to exegetically encompass the Vedas.

In order to discern such processes in the amṛtānanta, I will analyse, first of all, the ritual dimensions of this text. In order to comprehend the rich vein of ritual references in the amṛtānanta narrative we must look initially to the Vedic associations of the term amṛta. Geldner\(^ {46}\) argues that the concept of the ‘divine’ amṛta, the elixir of immortality, was related to the ‘human’ soma, the sacrificial plant extract, and the havis, the sacrificial butter or ghee. The soma sacrifice, as we have seen, is one of the ritual acts that is essential both to the creation and maintenance of cosmic order. Geldner suggests that the capacity for the butter to separate on entry into the sacrificial flame (amṛtam viprkvat) is an analogue of the separation of the primal ocean. He cites the mention of the sacred horse issuing ‘from the ocean, the primal source’ in a hymn of the first maṇḍala of the Rg Veda\(^ {47}\) (which resonates with Śaunaka’s mention of the ‘heroic king of horses’ in his request to hear the amṛtānanta). He further argues that this association of ocean, soma and creation-by-division is illustrated by the fact that the horse in question is described as ‘half divided from soma’ (asi somena samayā viprktah).\(^ {48}\) In this way the hymn includes the motif of oceanic birth, soma, and the

\(^{45}\) In such a brief summary, it is impossible to do justice to the range and depth of the Vedic subject matter. In addition, the position put forward, in the context of an essay analysing the narrative content of the Mahābhārata and not the Vedic corpus, emphasises only the basic principles of Vedic thought. The Vedic corpus presents, of course, multiple variant perspectives and, in particular, a deep fascination with paradox and ambivalence which we do not take up in this paper. Heesterman provides an excellent overview of these dimensions of the Vedic corpus in his ‘Vedic Sacrifice and Transcendence’ which forms the sixth chapter of his The Inner Conflict of Tradition. I take up these issues in relation to the Mahābhārata in the fifth chapter of my doctoral dissertation ‘On the Narrative Construction of the Significant ‘Rupture’ in the Sanskrit Mahābhārata, Doctoral Dissertation submitted to the University of Manchester, 2005.


\(^{47}\) RV 1.163.1.

\(^{48}\) RV 1.163.3. This resonates also with the ‘heroic king of horses’ in Śaunaka’s request to hear of the churning of the ocean. See also MacDonell’s inventory of Vedic horses and their associations with
very same verb of division used in the description of the sacrificial separation of the havi (vi + \(\sqrt{pṛc}\)).

Natalia Lidova in her *Drama and Ritual of Early Hinduism*\(^{49}\) takes these arguments a stage further when she adduces a complex parallelism between the Vedic description of *soma* pressing and the *amṛtamanthana*. Lidova argues that the narrative of the churning of the ocean in the *Mahābhārata* actualises, and one might add narrativises, a circle of ideas around *amṛta* in a far more concrete fashion than we find in Geldner’s analysis. Lidova examines several key Rg Vedic statements and suggests that the association between *amṛta* and the ocean is longstanding:

There is *amṛta* in the waters,
There is remedy in the waters,
Be valiant, ye gods, for their glory.\(^{50}\)

This association extends to *soma* as well:

From the ocean rose the honeyed wave,
Together with the *soma*, it acquired the properties of the *amṛta*.\(^{51}\)

The *amṛtamanthana* itself details this potent admixture of water and plant extracts, and it is from this milk ocean that the *amṛta* arises:

The many juices of herbs and the manifold extracts of the trees flowed into the water of the ocean. With the milk of these juices that had the power of the *amṛta*, and with the production of the liquid gold, the gods became immortal (*amara*-). The water of the ocean became milk and from this milk, butter floated up mingled with the fine essences (*rasottamaïś*).\(^{52}\)

The *Mahābhārata* narrative does not itself mention *soma*. Lidova argues, however, that it is clearly alluded to through the Rg Vedic *soma*/*amṛta* complex of ideas. There is even more compelling evidence within the *Mahābhārata*, however, such as the fact of the location of the telling of the *amṛtamanthana* in the context of two encompassing *soma* rites (the *sattras* of the two major meta-narrative frames) and in close proximity to the aforementioned tale of Kadrū and Vinatā, which explicitly draws a link between the *amṛta* and *soma* by using the two terms almost interchangeably. This is especially

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both the Sun and Soma, in his *Vedic Mythology* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass (repr.), 2002 [1898]), pp. 141 and 149ff.


\(^{50}\) *RV* 1.23.19, Lidova’s translation, *Ritual and Drama*, 68.

\(^{51}\) *RV* 4.58.1, Lidova’s translation, *Ritual and Drama*, 68.

\(^{52}\) *Mbh* 1.16.25–7:

tato nānuvīdhās tatra susruvuḥ sāgarāmbhasi
mahādrumānāṁ niryāsā bahavaḥ cauṣadhrāsīlāṁ
tesāṁ amṛtviryaḥ naśānāṁ payasaiva ca

amaratvaṁ surā jāgmuḥ kāṭcakasasya ca nihṣravā

atha tasya samudrasya taj jātam udakaṁ payah

rasottamair vimiśarāṁ ca tataḥ kṣīrād abhūd ēṛtaṁ
clear in the description within that tale of Garuḍa’s seizure of the amṛta soma from Indra; as Garuḍa moves in to steal the elixir it is the amṛta that is guarded by a dreadful iron wheel, but upon the successful completion of his mission Garuḍa refers to his theft of the soma.53 We see, therefore, that there is compelling evidence to link the Mahābhārata’s cosmogonic narrative of amṛta churning with the soma pressing of the Vedic ritual order and consequently the encompassing narratives of the Mahābhārata itself.

This can be seen even more clearly, if we accept Lidova’s interpretation and translation of one of the actual descriptions of the action of soma pressing in the Ṛg Veda (which once more employs equine imagery):

There where the broad-based stone is raised on high to press (the juices) out,
O Indra, swallow (the juices) squeezed by the mortar.
There where the woman performs now the pulling now the pushing (of the churn staff).

O Indra, swallow (the juices) squeezed by the mortar.
There where they tie the churn staff
As reins to drive (a horse),
O Indra, swallow (the juices) squeezed by the mortar.54

Thus, although there is a vast difference in scale, Lidova argues that the Mahābhārata narrative of the churning of the ocean is modelled not just on a cluster of key Vedic concepts but on the minutiae, the realia, of ritual action. It establishes a link between different scales and orders of ritual action, from the actions of the gods to the utensils used in day to day Vedic religious observance.55 This mirrors the interconnection of varying levels of conflict between opposed classes of beings, be they asuras and devas or Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas. Furthermore, it narrativises a feature of Vedic ritual practice that had not been the subject of narrative elaboration within the Vedic corpus itself. It also conforms to the fundamental emphasis in the Brāhmaṇas of the necessity of stabilising agents and stabilising practices. At this stage, these agents and practices are still resolutely divine and ritually based. This, however, will change, as we shall see below.

The amṛtanantana shows, very clearly, how the Mahābhārata projects ritual practice into narrative accounts of the significant past, and in so doing transforms ritual into a form of history. Patton’s perspective on the Brhaddevatā’s narrativisation of mantra is instructive here:

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53 *Mbh* 1.29.2 and *Mbh* 1.30.8
54 *RV* 1.28.1–4, Lidova’s translation, *Ritual and Drama*, 69.
55 In this regard, it is perhaps also relevant ‘that the offering ladle (juhū) and the companion ladle (upabhṛt) are associated with the sacrificer and his enemy.’ See Heesterman, *The Broken World*, 49 and 243, n. 16. This of course resonates with the wide variety of oppositional mythologemes in the Vedic corpus, not least of all the Devas and Asuras.
the function of narrative as commentary is the opposite of the Elidean escape from time. In the itihāsa explanations, mantra is inserted into the progression of events (one might say inserted into time) in order to provide a credible framework for its efficacy.

In the Mahābhārata, it is the yajña that is ‘inserted in time’. The results are, however, considerably more ambivalent than in the Brhaddevatā, as the ritual ‘framework for efficacy’ is subsequently usurped by alternate modes of religious practice. Indeed, the stage is set for the encompassment of yajña by kathā, that is to say, of ritual by story.

The process of ‘narrativisation’ is of tremendous significance for a number of reasons; it provides evidence for our hypothesised continuation of the Vedic sacrificial and conceptual order by other, chiefly narrative, means;56 it allows us to begin to

56 And marks, perhaps, a creative extension of the arthavādas of the Brāhmaṇas which Malamoud characterises as ‘placing the ritual present in relationship to a mythical past’ (see C. Malamoud, Cooking the World: Ritual and Thought in Ancient India, trans. David White, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996, 29). It is important to remember that these arthavādas originated as a form of argument in order to encourage observance of the vidhīs or codanās (the technical details of the sacrifice: the gestures, postures and formulae), these ‘arguments’ were forms of narrative justification and exaggerated litanies of benefit that resonate strongly with the content of the Mahābhārata (in both its content and its declarations of phalasruti, the benefits of hearing the text). Malamoud comments: ‘In the end, it is this husk of the arthavādas that becomes the flesh and blood of the broader tradition.’ It is precisely these arthavādas which Heesterman brackets in his characterisation of the ‘disconnected’ ritual order of the Brāhmaṇas. This is because they contextualise ritual practice in terms of social and personal benefit and the events of the significant past in a way which problematises his construction of a fundamentally asocial ritual order. It is therefore not surprising that Heesterman also tends towards a strong and polarised opposition of śruti and smṛti, with the former set apart in ‘lonely eminence,’ rather than a sense of their dynamic interrelationship in the context of a process of ongoing exegetical recovery (as Pollock has it in his ‘Tradition as Revelation: śruti, smṛti, and the Sanskrit Discourse of Power,’ in Lex et Litterae: Essays on Ancient Indian Law and Literature in Honor of Oscar Botto, ed. S. Lienhard, and I. Piobvana, Edizioni dell ‘Orso, 1997, 395–417. I am grateful to Simon Brodbeck for bringing this article to my attention). For details, see Heesterman, Chapter Six, ‘Vedic Sacrifice and Transcendence,’ in The Inner Conflict of Tradition, 87).

I further disagree with Heesterman that the Prājāpāti-Mṛtyu narrative of the Jaina Brāhmaṇa marks the exclusion of death from the sacrifice and the founding of a monolithic and autistic ritual order (although I am not of course denying that the ritual was heavily ‘transcendentalized’ in later philosophical exegesis). Heesterman seems to give the mīmāṃsik ‘legal fiction’ of the ritual order empirical status and dismiss other interpretations as arthavādic and non-authoritative, but they are only non-authoritative within the authority structure set up by the more philosophically minded exegetes! Indeed, it is precisely the Mīmāṃsik who lays the conceptual foundations for the ritual to do so much social dharmic ‘work’ in later śāstric traditions, despite their evisceration of its referential aspect. In addition, the narrative data seems to, all too often, run counter to their interpretations (not to mention the Viḍhīna literature, which consist of entirely of viniyogas for use outside the sacrificial situation entirely). I would rather argue that death was absorbed into a victorious agency that takes its place at the connective centre of the ritual act and which must evince the attendant interpretive competencies in order to activate its critical position. The fact of the post-Vedic sedimentation (at least in the ideal-typical discourse of the Dharma-smṛti literature) of ksatriya and brāhmaṇa social and ritual roles has been overemphasised in this context. The role of connective centre is open to both king and brāhmaṇa (and renouncer) as a consequence of the fluidity of the original conception of these designations (for details of this fluidity see Heesterman, The Inner Conflict of Tradition, 150ff), not as
discern a broader agenda of exegetical encompassment in the Mahābhārata; and it sheds light on the particular emphasis on the somayajīna, in the meta-narrative frames of the Mahābhārata.

The amṛtamanthana is therefore engaged in diverse forms of ‘work’ which begin to satisfy my definition of an application of ‘narrative theory:’ the text presents a hypotheses about the origins of ordered social and cosmic life and further invokes a Vedic paradigm to explain, and encourage further interpretation of, this hypothesis. These activities additionally take their place in wider exegetical processes, and related conceptual developments, in early South Asian religious discourse.

It is of critical importance in this regard, then, that the churning of the ocean narrative provides the basis for an aetiology of not just the cosmos but also of the Mahābhārata itself, and furthermore that these two creations are fundamentally interrelated. Here we will move from a series of complex parallelisms between creative ritual action and the narrativisation of ritual action to a concerted attempt at exegetical encompassment in the text: a narrative coup d’etat.57

It is in the context of the self-revelation of Nārāyaṇa in the Śānti-parvan that we find a fascinating shifting of churning imagery to textual transmission:

This narrative, O king, of the hundreds of other upākhyānas that you have righteously heard from me, is the essence (sāra). In the past, O king, the amṛta was churned (nirnathyā) and extracted by the Suras (Devas) and Asuras and likewise now, here, by the learned (vipra) a story-amṛta (kathā-amṛta) was extracted (uddhīṭa).

an isolated pre-classical ‘stage,’ but rather as an ongoing, if highly contested, feature of early South Asian religious discourse. This is made particularly clear in the culmination of the rājasīya royal consecration in the formula ‘Thou, O King, art brahman’ (See Heesterman, The Royal Consecration Ritual, Gravenhage: Mouton and Co., 1957, 141 and 150). This is also reflected in, amongst other things, the wide applications of the term prāśīda in post-Vedic discourse to designate both the temple and the royal residence-building on its original Vedic sense of a seat in the ritual enclosure (see Gonda, ‘Ancient Indian Kingship (2),’ 139, and S. Kramrisch, The Hindu Temple, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986, 136). The conflictual dimensions of the sacrifice were centralized rather than excluded from the ritual, and in this way, Heesterman’s brilliant analysis of the sacrifice, drawing on the work of Renou, as ‘a manipulation of enigma’ (see The Broken World, 36), and as a ‘manipulation of the organic order of the world’ (see The Broken World, 31) can then be extended both to the ritual and to those second order attempts at manipulation of the ritual enigma we find in the exegetical genres both philosophical, ‘epic’ and sāstric (as well as in wider forms of religious practice, from architecture to the physical disciplines). The connective centre is, then, the nexus of life and death encompassed. This does not necessarily result in a radical separation of ritual from social life. This is especially clear when there is competition for the assumption of this connective centre, as there is in the Mahābhārata narratives of the struggles between Yudhisṭhira and his arch rivals Jarasandha and Duryodhana.

57 This parallels similar strategies in the Bhaddevatā analysed by Patton in her ‘Myth as Argument.’ She terms such processes as an ‘attempt at totalisation’ (see, for example, p. 34).

58 Mbh 12.326.114–5:
matto ‘nyāni ca te rājan upākhyāṇaśatāni vai
yāni śrutāni dharmyāni teśāṁ sāro ‘yam uddhītaṁ
surāśaurair yathā rājan nirnathyāṃtām uddhī́taṁ
evam etat purā vipraih kathāṃtām ihodhī́taṁ
From a churning of the ocean to produce a functional cosmos, and an attendant battle between Devas and Asuras, we come to a churning of text, in the here and now, concerned with a vast battle between two opposed groups of cousins.59

One of the fundamental Vedic mythologemes is here reworked into an account of textual transmission. This occurs within a text which, as we have seen, contextualises its main plot in two encompassing somayajña. In addition it is, of course, the somayajña that forms the ritual basis of the original churning narrative of the amçtamanthana. In this way, we have come full circle; the Mahābhārata moves us from the realia of ritual practice to the narrativisation of these practices to the complete transposition of function from ritual to narrative. For who are the pressers of the kathā-amṛta if not the participants in the Naimisha and Kurukṣetra recitations and by extension the numberless potential participants in future recitations?60

We find, in the same passage of the Śāntiparvan, further evidence of this strategic blurring of the creative roles of ritual and text through an emphasis on the creative function of memory, Brahmā and the Vedas. First of all Nārāyaṇa must, at the commencement of each new creation (each mahākalpa), remember Brahmā:

Hundreds and thousands of mahākalpas pass together with creations (sarga) and dissolutions (pralaya), O Indra of kings. At the beginning of each creation (sargasyādau) Brahmā the mighty (pra-bhu) creation-maker (prajā-sarga-kara) is remembered (smṛtā).62

The universe is initiated by a primary act of memory undertaken by a ‘stabilising agent,’ Nārāyaṇa. This is in accordance with the Brāhmaṇic schema, typified by the roles and activities of Prajāpati, which I outlined above. This empowered concept of

59 This link is made particularly explicit in the context of the explanation of how the gods will take birth to lighten the burden of the earth (the fractious Asuras have already taken birth and are wreaking havoc). This is the explicit mythic rationale of the Mahābhārata war given at Mbh 1.58 and summarised at 59.1–6. This is immediately followed by a list of which Asuras and Devas took birth as which heroes (or anti-heroes) of the action of the main plot. See Mbh 1.61. Cutting across this are the divine beings who actually father characters of the main plot, such as in the case of the five Pāṇḍava brothers Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva from, respectively, Dharma, Vāyu, Indra and the divine twins the Aśvins. See Mbh 12.326.104–5a:

50 The recitation of Vedic texts is itself considered a yajña, a brahmayajña. See A. Hillebrandt, Ritual-Literatur, Strassburg: K.J. Trübner, 1897, 75.

61 The Śāntiparvan is very clearly aware of a cyclical model of macro and micro epochs (as is the Ādiparvan), of what we might call yugic theory. This does not stop the parvan from making statements which complicate and problematise (and possibly pre-date) this model of a cyclical model of cosmic and historical time. Building on Kunti’s assertion in the Udyogaparvan at Mbh 5.130.11–8 that the king makes the age, the Śānti repeatedly takes up this idea that it is the conduct of the king, and not the inevitable procession of cosmic time with its entropic sequence of declining world ages (yugas), that constitutes a given age. I see this notion of sovereignty as far closer to the ‘Prajāpati model’ of the Brāhmaṇas. See Mbh 12.70.25–7, 12.92.6–8 and also at 12.139.

62 Mbh 12.326.104–5a:

mahākalpasahasrāni mahākalpaśātāni ca
samatītāni rājendra sargāś ca pralayāś ca ha
sargasyādau smṛto brahmā prajāsargakaraḥ prabhuḥ
memorial activity, especially within a complex hierarchy of resemblances, has an inevitable impact on the more restricted arena of the remembrance of the Mahābhārata through recitation. Each act of transmission becomes, potentially, a creative act. This becomes especially clear as the narrative continues: Brahmā, in turn, is dependent on the Vedas as a textual blueprint for his creation of a functional cosmos:

The Vedas are my primary eyes (parama caṇḍa), the Vedas are my ultimate strength (parama bala). The Vedas are my great refuge (parama dhāma), the Vedas are my ultimate Brahma (brahma uttama) […] Without the Vedas the world of my creation is in darkness (andhakāra). Without the Vedas how should I diligently act (kuryām) to create (sraṣṭum) the worlds (loka)?

Brahmā here expresses himself in terms of a capacity to create, but only in the presence of, and in reference to, the Vedas and he himself must be remembered. Here a further, subordinate, ‘stabilising agent,’ Brahmā, is introduced as well as a fundamental substrate and guide for ‘stabilising practice,’ the Vedas. These are, of course, the very texts which enjoin ritual action and which cultivate and pre-suppose the complex conceptual order and attendant interpretive competencies that we discussed above. In addition, we now find that memory and authoritative text are explicitly connected to one another. This, again, resonates with the structure of the Mahābhārata as an authoritative text based upon a series of conversationally located, and ritually contextualised, acts of public memory practice. These acts, in and of themselves, narrate the significant past into being and furthermore provide a model for parallel acts of narrative activity. This is, of course, directly parallel to the way in which the Vedic corpus provides both a description of, and speculations concerning, ritual activity as well as exhortations to actually perform the ritual (a performance which is essential to the maintenance of a functional cosmos at all levels of being).

The texts we have translated thus cause us to re-evaluate the commonplace assertion in the Mahābhārata that it is a fifth Veda. Such an assertion is cast in a new light by its being placed just after the sequence of speculations and assertions we have been considering. The Mahābhārata’s claim to Vedic status must be understood in relation to its understanding, and construction, of that status and as part of a complex strategy of exegetical encompassment. That is to say, a claim to Vedic status here indicates the intention to assume the creative function of these texts as an act of recovery. It is precisely at the culmination of the texts under consideration that the

63 12.335.29–30:
vedā me paramaṁ caṅṣur vedā me paramaṁ balaṁ
vedā me paramaṁ dhāma vedā me brahma cottaṁ
mama vedā hṛtāḥ sarve dānava-bhyāṁ balād itaṁ
andhakāra hi me lokā jātā vedair vinākṛtāṁ
vedāṁ rte hi kini kuryāṁ lokān vai sraṣṭum udyataṁ

64 This can be compared with the Nātyaśāstra’s claim to the same status in its opening aetiology. Both texts posit a new form of activity capable of creatively mediating cosmic and social life. The
Mahābhārata asserts once again that it is mahābhārata-pañcamā, the ‘fifth’ of the Vedas. 65 Our analyses thus provide further evidential support for Pollock’s reformulation of the concept of smṛti: 66

[...] material that, having once been heard in recitation is inferentially recoverable from present reformulations (in language or practice), which once existed as part of a Vedic corpus. 67

Furthermore, such an empowered notion of text is inevitably at the centre of a competitive struggle for its creative resources. Here the Heestermanic characterisation of the sacrifice as a conflict over ‘the goods of life’ is liberated from its diachronic, developmental, framework in his work and re-injected into middle and late Vedic as well as immediately post-Vedic early South Asian religious discourse. 68 Indeed, in the Mahābhārata, competition emerges as the enduring pre-requisite for access to Vedically derived forms of creative power. The comment of David Carpenter is instructive in this regard, he says of the Vedic corpus, ‘What is being canonized here is as much a form of action, and indeed a form of culture, as an authoritative collection of texts.’ 69 What is happening in the Mahābhārata is a second order, Vedically dependent, ‘canonization’ of an alternate form of creative action.

These processes can be discerned even more readily in a related series of narrations in the Mahābhārata that pertain to text, sacrifice and kingship. I will demonstrate, again, the replication of a series of relations at a different level of a vast hierarchy of being in the context of the narration of the significant past. This time the creative role in question is that of the king and it is a prompt in the Śānti for a tour de

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65 In adhyāya 327.18 of the Śāntiparvan.
66 Generally characterised as ‘tradition,’ as ‘that which is remembered’ and normally opposes to śruti ‘that which is heard.’ Pollock convincingly problematises this distinction suggesting that smṛti is not, in fact, subordinate to śruti, but rather marks the recovery of forms of Vedic knowledge that may be inferred from the existent materials. S. Pollock, ‘Tradition as Revelation.’
67 S. Pollock, ‘Tradition as Revelation,’ 408.
68 See, for example, Chapter Two ‘Brahmin, Ritual and Renouncer’ in The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship and Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985) and the classic analyses of first two chapters of The Broken World of Sacrifice.
force of synecdochic excess that is focussed on the composition of an encyclopaedic treatise.70

The critical passage under consideration is the fifty-ninth adhyāya of the Śāntiparvan.71 The text opens with Yudhīṣṭhira asking of the origin of kingship (rājān). Bhīṣma responds by first telling of a crisis in the kṛta age, the first of the ages of humankind. He states that the Vedas had been lost and with them all cosmic and social order. The gods petition Brahmā who in response composes a compendium of all knowledge in a hundred thousand chapters:

(Brahmā) then composed with his own intellect (sva-buddhi) a hundred thousand adhyāyas that explained (varṇita) dharma, artha and kāma (duty, profit and pleasure).72

It is immediately interesting that Brahmā’s response to an existential crisis can be textual. It is also significant that he provides not a copy of the Vedas but a new explanatory and encyclopaedic work which recapitulates them.73 This is significant because it emphasises the fact that what is important in a time of crisis is not the reproduction of specific contents, but rather the satisfaction of core functions. It also demonstrates the sense of the ‘recovery’ of Vedic knowledge that is essential to Pollock’s view of smṛti. Indeed, it is a concise narrative expression, or perhaps better a form of narrative theorisation, of precisely this view of smṛti. Brahmā’s compendious production is then subject to a complex process of transmission and abridgement. Śiva abridges the text first of all:

Aware of the yugic decline (hrās) of human life-spans (āyus) lord Śiva abridged (saṃcikṣepa) the śāstra of powerful import made (kṛtam) by Brahmā.74

There is then a further abridgement of the text by Indra, Brhaspati, Kavi and the seven ṛṣis.75 This tale of textual transmission76 is immediately followed by a history of the

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70 By encyclopaedic, I refer to the inclusivistic goals of the text. I am deploying the term in an extended sense rather than literally (as a genre designation) and I do not wish to indicate a close correspondence between the enlightenment and post-enlightenment form of the encyclopaedia and the Mahābhārata. Despite Hildebeitel’s recent critique of the use of this term (see Rethinking the Mahābhārata, 2001, 161–3) I think Patton’s emphasis, following Paolo Cherchi, on ‘encyclopedism’ as an ‘attempt to organise a comprehensive body of knowledge’ is instructive here and has lead me to retain the term (which I came to without prior knowledge of this unfolding debate). For details see Myth as Argument, 455ff.
71 There is also a telling of this tale amongst the appendices of the Bhīṣmaparvan, see App. 7.8.762–820. In this version Prīhu also performs the Asvamedha.
72 Mbh 12.59.29: tato ’dhyāyasahasrāṇāṁ sataṁ cakre svabuddhijam yatra dharmas tathaivārthaḥ kāmaḥ caivānuvarṇitaḥ
73 In much the same way, in the Anuṅgī, Kṛṣṇa is unable to repeat the Gīta to the forgetful Arjuna but can only tell a related itihāsa from the past (purātanaṁ). See Mbh 14.9–15.
74 Mbh 12.59.87: yugamāṁ ayuṣo hrāsasya viṣāya bhagavāṁ śivāḥ sarinīkṣepa tataḥ śāstraṁ mahārthaṁ brahmaṁ kṛtam
origin of human kingship. The two narratives of origins (textual and dynastic) are juxtaposed and interdependent, for the king will ensure the correct application and

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75 Mbh 12.59.89–92.
76 In the Rg Veda it is not the pressing of the amṛta that is the focus of the conflict but the ritual favours of speech herself, Vāc. She is described as divided in RV 1.164.45, in a sūkta which also provides some interesting parallels to the Mahābhārata descriptions of textual transmission: ‘Vāc was divided in four parts. These those Brahmans with insight know. Three parts, which are hidden, people do not activate; the fourth part they speak’ she is also described as she who ‘in highest heaven has a thousand syllables’ (RV 1.164.41, this might relate to the description of the triple Veda itself as the ‘thousandfold progeny of Vāc’ at Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 5.5.5.12). This parallels the multiple parts and constituencies of the encyclopaedic texts described above and of the Mahābhārata itself. The sūkta goes on to describe how Agni instructs the gods, and subsequently men, in the universe sustaining sacrifice. This resonates again with the churning of the ocean narrative and that of Prthu, in which two orders of being engage in successive acts of cosmic and social stabilisation. The portions of Vāc that are not known further provide a means of establishing a resource for differential levels of knowledge of the true significances of the sacrifice. It is upon this basis that the notion of the person of knowledge is established, the maniśin, the vipra or the kaviyamana (RV 1.164.45/6/18 respectively). It is of course, again the learned, vipra, who are to churn the kathā-amṛta in the Mahābhārata. Here, we might point to a certain degree of competition being introduced not only at the levels of gods and kings (locked in agonistic conflict over access to Vedically derived forms of creative power) but also at the level of the transmitters, or the ‘pressers’ of raw story stuff (kathā-amṛta). In the context of early Vedic discourse, it is the person of knowledge who wins in the sacrificial contest (RV 10.71.10) and who ‘lauds their position of immortality’ (amṛtasya bhāgām […] abhisvāranti, RV 1.164.21). It is tempting to infer a similar necessity for those who press the kathā-amṛta in the Mahābhārata passage. This notion is, to an extent born out by those studies which have taken up Vedic sacrificial contexts for narration. See C.Z. Minkowski, ‘Janamejaya’s Sātra and Ritual Structure,’ Journal of the American Oriental Society 109 (1989): 401–20. R.C. Hazra, ‘The Aśvamedha, the Common Source of Origin of the Purāṇa Pāṇcava-laksana and the Mahābhārata,’ Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute 35 (1954): 190–203 and R. Dandekar, ‘The Pāṇiplava (Revolving Cycle of Legends) at the Aśvamedha,’ Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute 33 (1952): 33, 26–40. There is also a potential relation to the Mahābhārata in relation to forms of stabilising religious discourse. In our Rg Vedic sūkta, Vāc is the agent of creative stabilisation: ‘After Vāc had fashioned the floods, the oceans flowed forth from her, in consequence of which the four directions exist, and then the aksara flowed forth; on it this entire universe has its existence’ (RV 164.42: tāśya samudrā ādhi vī kṣarantī tēna jīvanti prādīṣaś cātāśrah, tātāh kṣaraty aksarām tād vīvam āpā jīvati). K.R. Norman summarises the matter as follows: ‘Thus by the sounds she uttered Vāc produced the material of the universe, which was, however, chaotic, unorganised, when it was produced. But, Dirghatamas avers, she had also produced the aksara, the instrument with which the unorganised material was to be organized. To make use of the aksara and with it perform the first sacrifice, which was that of the creation, the ‘heroes’ (vīraḥ) took over (RV 1.164.43). Who the ‘heroes’ were and what their origin Dirghatamas does not state.’ (K.R. Norman, ‘The Creative Role of the Goddess Vāc in the Rg Veda,’ 395). Although we cannot shed any light on the identity of these original heroes, the relevance of this material for the brāhmaṇic schema of creation > dysfunction > stabilising agent > stabilising practice and for related conceptions of sovereignty and textual activity in the Mahābhārata is clear: the universe is stabilised through the combination of language and ritual practice. In the Vāc narrative we find something of a conceptual foundation for the creative role of subsequent organisations of aksara, and thus subsequent forms of Vedically self-deriving religious expression (the Vāc narrative is itself subject to a series of narrative reworkings, extensions and developments that may be found in the Kāthaka Samhitā 12.5.27.1, Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa 20.14.2, Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 5.5.5.12, and Taittiriya Samhitā 6.1.4).
interpretation of Brahmā’s great treatise on social and cosmic life. The genealogy of kings is further complicated by accounts of the origin of diverse races such as the niṣādas (hill and forest dwellers), and the broad category of the foreigners or mlecchas from the body of a particularly dysfunctional king by the name of Vena. This resonates with the spectre, in the Brāhmaṇas, of problematic creation. From the very same adharmic king comes the dharmic King Pṛthu (who issues from the right arm of Vena). Thus a functional king appears from a dysfunctional king. This implicitly parallels the transformation of an abortive originary creative act into a functional cosmos and closely adheres to the Brāhmanic schema of problematic creation > stabilising agent > stabilising practice > establishment of ordered cosmos. This parallel is developed further, as we shall see below. The first words of Pṛthu are revealing:

I have attained an understanding of dharma and artha that is very subtle (susūkṣma). Tell me in detail what I shall do with it.  

Pṛthu’s first utterance is one that asserts the subtlety of his understanding but which immediately follows this assertion with a request for guidance and instruction from the assembled beings. Pṛthu thus exhibits an ideal balance of a sharp intellect with a necessary consciousness of hierarchy. The narrative continues with the birth of Śūta and Magadha (the bard and the panegyrist) and Pṛthu’s levelling of the earth. Again, it is worth noting the emphasis on the combination of originary actions based on textual instructions and prototypes and the capacity for such action to be, in turn, re-expressed, re-told, and thus recovered. This is made especially clear in the mention of the birth of the bard and the panegyrist before Pṛthu commences the vast act of the creative stabilisation of the earth. Gonda says of the songs of the bards:

The contents of the panygerics which are considered as historical truth have the effect of a magical performance, causing the exploits described to spread their inherent power and to become active again in the person of the listener.

In addition, the earth itself, prthvī, in traditional etymologies, is named after Pṛthu, thus we also have a further narrative reinforcement of the identification of king and

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77 Mbh 12.59.107:
susūkṣmā me samuṭpannā buddhir dharmārthadarśini
anayā kiṁ mayā kāryaṁ tan me tattvena śanīṣita

78 Heesterman, rather oddly, interprets this as a confession of an ‘utterly feeble grasp of dharma.’ See Inner Conflict of Tradition, 116.

79 For the birth of the bard and the panegyrist see Mbh 12.59.118 For the stabilisation of the earth see 59.19. This is a narrative which also occurs in the Satapatha Brāhmaṇa (7.4.2.6) and the Śākhāyana Grhya Sūtra (3.3.2) as well as elsewhere. For further details see S. Kramrisch, The Hindu Temple, 13.

80 J. Gonda, ‘Ancient Indian Kingship from a Religious Point of View (2),’ 131. The role of the bard and/ or the panygeric is mentioned from the Rg Veda onwards. See RV 5.42.8, 1.25.4, 2.1.16, 7.18.21 and Atharva Veda 19.49.6, 1.122.12, it is still a duty of the king to listen to itihāsas in the Artha Śāstra, see AS 1.5.11–6.
world which resonates with the identification of Prajāpati and the cosmos in the Brāhmaṇa literature. It is only after Prthu has conquered the earth that he is crowned by all beings.\textsuperscript{81} That is to say his sovereignty is predicated on his stabilising activities, just as Prajāpati’s was. More than this, the king must himself engage in an agonistic conflict before he may achieve sovereignty. This is made even more explicit in a star passage that follows this portion of the tale which refers to Prthu’s use of the curved end of his bow (\emph{dhanu-koṭi}) to subdue the earth.\textsuperscript{82} This resonates both with the \textit{Asura-Deva} conflict and with the action of the main plot, i.e. with Yudhishṭhira’s bloody victory over the Kauravas. The actions of King Prthu also resonate with the ritual action of the \textit{amṛtamanthana} (and all the associations that this text brings with it). This is made fully explicit when Prthu milks or presses the earth:

> The earth was milked (\textit{dugdha}) by him for seventeen kinds of crop (\textit{sasya}) as desired by yakṣas, rākṣasas, and nāgas.\textsuperscript{83}

Thus gods and kings are brought in this narrative into a relation of hierarchical resemblance (dependent on a \textit{bandhu}-like competency) in their common activity of pressing either ocean or earth for the fundamentals of ordered cosmic and social life.\textsuperscript{84} There is also a concomitant necessity for this to involve some form of armed conflict. The struggle for the means of sacrificial reproduction and regulation of the cosmos is thus one that occurs at the level of both gods and humans. The \textit{Devas} and \textit{Asuras} are in conflict both ritually, in the competitive churning action that constitutes a ritual tug of war, and literally, in terms of their actual battle in the dénouement of the \textit{amṛtamanthana}. Indeed, in the \textit{Aitareya Brāhmaṇa} (1.14.5ff) it is the action of making \textit{Soma} the king of the \textit{Devas} that ensures their victory over the \textit{Asuras}.\textsuperscript{85} These struggles resonates with the Prthu narrative and are also recapitulated in the main plot of the \textit{Mahābhārata} in the competition between the \textit{dharmarāja} (‘King dharma’) Yudhishṭhira and his main rivals (Jarasandha and Duryodhana) for the means of consecration of royal status, that is to say the Vedic \textit{Aṣvamedha} and \textit{Rājasūya} rites.\textsuperscript{86}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{81} \textit{Mbh} 12.59.120–2.
\item \textsuperscript{82} See \textit{Mbh} 12.132.1–3 after 12.59.119.
\item \textsuperscript{83} \textit{Mbh} 12.59.126:
> \textit{teneyantī prīhvī dugdhaḥ sasyāṁ daśa sapta ca yakṣārākṣāsanaṅgaṁ cāpīḍiṣṭiṁ yasya yasya yat}

This narrative is also given in an appendix to the Dronāparvan, see App. 7.8.781–820. This is an extended account of the narrative in which the earth allows herself to be milked at Prthu’s behest by the devas, asuras, humans, snakes, the seven sages, the yakṣas, gandharvas, apsaras and the pītris. This marks the narrative inflation of the narrative to such an extent it seems that the original deva-asura churning is subordinated to the agency of Prthu, the human king. This might be adduced as an example of a later text’s reworking and development of earlier narrative materials.

\item \textsuperscript{84} Indeed, Robert Lingat suggests that the life of the king is sometimes conceptualised as one long \textit{sattra} in his \textit{Les sources du droit dans le système traditionnel de l’Inde} (Paris, 1967), p. 239.
\item \textsuperscript{85} See also J. Gonda, ‘Ancient Indian Kingship from the Religious Point of View (2),’ 133, for a further discussion of this passage.
\item \textsuperscript{86} These narrative interrelationships are very close to what B.K. Smith terms ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ connections in the Vedic corpus: the parallel activities of gods and men are an example of
\end{itemize}
The narrative of king Prthu (the name itself also means, ‘celebrated,’ ‘spacious’ and even ‘prolix’), is, however, as we have seen, additionally connected to a tale of the origins of a narrative charter, a narrative blueprint, of just such an ordered social and cosmic life. The custodianship of this compendium, or one very like it (for we are still in the midst of a hierarchical system of resemblances), becomes constitutive in this adhväya of dharmic kingship. There is a parallel description of the Mahābhārata as subject to a process of successive abridgement:

(He composed) a collection of six million verses (lit. sixty hundred thousand). Three million dwell in the world of the Devas, one and a half million are proclaimed in the world of the Pūrīs, one point four million in the world of Rākṣasas and Yāskas and one hundred thousand dwell amongst men.

a vertical connections in which, ‘operates between […] elements […] located on differently and hierarchically ranked cosmological levels’ while the relationship between Prthu and Yudhishtīra is an example of a ‘horizontal’ connection which ‘link resembling components […] within the same cosmological plane’ (B.K. Smith, Reflections, 73). This ‘connections’ are developed into a broader, extra-ritual, hermeneutic of resemblance in the exegetical principle, that is to say, a hermeneutic of resemblance. This underscores both the necessity of a stabilising agency and an accompanying textual charter at multiple cosmic levels and the complex agenda of ‘dharmacisation’ in early South Asian religious discourse. See P. Olivelle, ‘The Semantic History of Dharma in the Middle and Late Vedic Periods’; and P. Horsch, ‘From Creation Myth to World Law: the Early History of Dharma,’ Journal of Indian Philosophy 32 (2004): 491–511 and 423–48. See also see footnote 91 below.

For a further discussion of kingship and the earth, see J. Gonda, ‘Ancient Indian Kingship from the Religious Point of View (3),’ Numen 4 (1957): 54ff.

In a personal communication, Simon Brodbeck points to the parallel variations in the multiple agencies who originate both encyclopaedic treatises and the institution of kingship and the attendant rod of punishment (and guarantor of dharma), the dansa: at 12.59 Viṣṇu inaugurates kingship, at 12.67 Brahmā does, the institution of dansa occurs at 12.122 and 12.160, with Brahmā and Viṣṇu in the respective creative roles. This underscores both the necessity of a stabilising agency and an accompanying textual charter at multiple cosmic levels and the complex agenda of ‘dharmacisation’ in early South Asian religious discourse. See P. Olivelle, ‘The Semantic History of Dharma in the Middle and Late Vedic Periods’ and P. Horsch, ‘From Creation Myth to World Law: the Early History of Dharma,’ Journal of Indian Philosophy 32 (2004): 491–511 and 423–48. See also see footnote 91 below.

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99 Star Passage at Mbh 1.1.63, *1.29.2–4:

śaṣṭiṃ satasahāsraṁ ca cakārāyāṁ sa sanhițāṁ
triṃśačchataharmaṁ ca devaloke pratiṣṭhitam
pitrye puñña-daśa proktam rakṣoṣāyaśa caturdaśa
ekaṁ satasahāsrant tu mānuśeṣu pratiṣṭhitam

There is also an encyclopaedic treatise of the seven sages that functions as yet another parallel to this. This is mentioned at 12.322.26–30 as the sāstram uttamam. There is also mention of similar encyclopaedic texts for kings (12.64—obtained by heroic kings from Viṣṇu; thanks to Simon Brodbeck for giving me this reference). It seems that the Mahābhārata most certainly wishes to foreground the composition of encyclopaedic texts!
Thus there is a compelling reason to read these encyclopaedic texts in terms of the Mahābhārata and vice versa. Indeed, Vyāsa describes the extent of the Mahābhārata as covering all sciences, the Vedas, and the accounts of the past (itiḥāsa and purāṇa). This seems to further emphasise the parallel with Brahmā’s great work.

The relation in the Brāhmaṇas and in the amṛtamanthana was between ritual and cosmos. In the story of King Prthu, and the account of the creative activities of Brahmā, such a relation obtains, but this is additionally mediated by a complex vision of the role of memorial and textual activity in the creation and maintenance of ordered social life. These activities centre on compositions that recover forms of Vedic knowledge. In addition, the importance of dharma is fore-grounded in the narratives of the establishment of earthly sovereignty much more prominently than it is in the narratives of divine activity. It is significant that these narratives of earthly sovereignty take shape in the later Brāhmaṇas (such as the Śatapatha), the Gṛhya Śūtras (such as the Śatkhāyana) and the Mahābhārata. These texts index, or perhaps better provide a narrative theory of, the cross application of forms of Vedic knowledge to the social realm that is such a marked feature of post-Vedic religious developments. This is the under-examined complement to the much explored ‘internalisation’ of ritual understandings in Brāhmaṇical and Śramanīc tradition. Pollock, once more, summarises the matter succinctly in the context of the concept of dharma:

The elaboration of the concept dharma beyond its primary field of reference—Vedic ritualism, or <sacrifice, recitation, and gifts>, as the Chāndogya Upanisad defines the three components of dharma (2.23.1)—was a development of crucial (if as yet apparently underappreciated) significance in Sanskrit socio-cultural history. Far from accepting the paradox as Heesterman formulates it—that the Vedas have really nothing to do with dharma, and so have <ultimate authority over a world to which they are in no way related >—we should rather, in keeping with actual historical sequence, reverse (and so cancel) it: the <world> outside of ritualism had originally little to do with dharma [...].

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90 For a full description see App. 1.1.13–40.
91 The post-Vedic elaboration of the dharma concept (loosely translated as duty, law or meritorious action) is the ultimate expression of constructivist Vedic logic liberated from the confines of the sacrificial arena. Conformity to dharma (which operated on a vast number of hierarchically ordered and mutually resembling levels of being) became constitutive, in the post-Vedic period, of cosmic and social order in a way that precisely paralleled the earlier conception of the profound necessity of the performance of Vedic ritual for the sake of cosmic stability. Thus, by the time of the Dharmashastra, the role of stabilising agent, has been extended (at least ideally) to all beings as an ongoing existential commitment to the stabilising practice of the performance of dharma. Hacker defines this conception of dharma as ‘[…] a concrete, positive […] model of conduct that has already existed before its realization in some way’ (P. Hacker, ‘Dharma in Hinduismus,’ Zeitschrift für Missionwissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft 49 (1965): 103). This description of dharma resonates with the notion of smṛti as a process of recovery. The narrativised rituals of the Mahābhārata concretise, socialise, and provide an interpretive arena for, this the progressive ‘dhammacisation’ of early south Asian religious discourse by situating ritual activity in determinate cosmic and social contexts.
spilled over the conceptual confines of sacrificial ritualism and came to encompass virtually the entire range of activities of Sanskrit society.92

This extension of the dharma concept is part of a wider exegetical process that is not, of course, limited to the Brāhmaṇas, Grhya Sūtras and the Mahābhārata: Patton suggests:

The Nirukta intends to illuminate nothing less than the Vedic language as a whole, while Śābara and the Brhaddevatā intend to explain the mantra as a crucial aspect of Vedic knowledge [...] the Brhaddevatā’s taxonomies push the boundaries of Vedic language outside the ritual into the mouths of the gods, the heroes of the past, and the ritual priests.93

The Mahābhārata also projects the sacrifice, and with it dharma, into a world of narrative action in the significant past.94 The text, however, then goes even further; it explicitly connects a form of discourse very like itself to dharmic kingship and to social and cosmic order. The Mahābhārata, in this way, constitutes both divine and earthly sovereigns as ‘stabilising agents,’ on the model of Prajāpati, who are in turn dependent on a considerably expanded range of textual ‘stabilising practices.’ These ‘stabilising practices’ all recover lost forms of Vedic knowledge. These acts of ‘recovery,’ in fact, constitute a series of hermeneutic innovations regarding, amongst other things, sovereignty, dharma, and textual activity. In this way, the text constructs a model of sovereignty and the significant past that justifies and augments the power

92 S. Pollock, ‘The Revelation of Tradition.’
93 L. Patton, Myth as Argument, 134.
94 In addition, the Mahābhārata, to an extent, ‘inverts,’ or at least extends, the exegetic order of practice in the Vedas and Vedāṅgas. Both Jan Houben and Michael Witzel have analysed the extent to which the pragmatics of ritual practice had an impact on the form of their supporting, and even competing, mythologemes. Witzel comments, for example: The Brāhmaṇa authors, indeed, had all the freedom to tell whatever story might appear plausible or appropriate to them in order to explain the problem in question [...] One should not forget that they did so in constant competition with other ritual specialists or even with whole schools of specialists. Consequently, they had to come forward with ever new, more ingenious, or simply baffling explanations (see M. Witzel, ‘On the Origin of the ‘Frame Story’ in Old Indian Literature,’ in Hinduismus und Buddhismus Festschrift für Ulrich Schneider, ed. Harry Falk, Hedwig Falk, Freiburg: Hedwig Falk, 1987, 406–7). While Jan Houben suggests that ritual structure functioned as a ‘laboratory of early speculative reflection’ (see J. Houben, ‘The ritual pragmatics of a Vedic hymn: the ‘Riddle Hymn’ and the Pravargya Ritual,’ Journal of the American Oriental Society 120, 4 (2000): 529). In the case of the Mahābhārata, it is no longer the precise details of the ritual forms which stimulate narrative activity, but rather it is the ritual derived mythologeme, and, very often, further narratives of ritual performances in the human past, that themselves provide the basis for further narrative elaborations. Thus we are dealing with second order processes of the exegesis of exegesis, in which earlier forms of narrative elaboration are the point of departure for new interpretations. This is, I think, a far more serviceable characterisation of aitihāsika practice than Pollock’s characterisation of them as ‘a mode of explanation that viewed the Vedic texts as what they are, historical-cultural products’ (‘From discourse of ritual to discourse of power in Sanskrit culture,’ Journal of Ritual Studies 4 (1990): 315–45). What we are, in fact, seeing in the Mahābhārata (and from which we might infer something of the hermeneutic methodologies of the lost aitihāsikas) is the treatment of Vedic practice as historical-cultural product.
of its own form of narrative discourse while indexing a complex series of conceptual developments in early South Asian religious discourse.

My analyses show that a secondary function of this movement from ritual to narrative practice is that, just as the ritual manual guides and models actual practice, so too the Mahābhārata models narrative practice. We will now take up these issues in a broader examination of the strategies employed in the Mahābhārata for the exploration of the significant past.

The exploration of the significant past in the Sanskrit Mahābhārata

Paul Ricoeur has produced a brilliant, and succinct, analysis of the general failure in critical theory to develop an adequate appreciation of narrative time:

Here we hit upon a temporal constitution which is completely overlooked in the theory of action by anti-narrativist arguments and in literary criticism by structuralist claims. Both take it for granted that narrative as such is merely chronological and that chronology means abstract succession. This is why no other device seems to remain open except a subordination of sequential history to explanatory history, on the one hand, or the reduction of the chronology of the narrative message to the a-temporality of narrative codes. What is overlooked in both camps is the tremendous complexity of narrative time.95

Having addressed something of the Mahābhārata’s rich discourse on sacrificial, textual and cosmic origins, I will now turn to the specifics of the ‘tremendous complexity’ of narrative time in the Mahābhārata. I will argue that the Mahābhārata sets up a complex model of the significant past that builds on its foundational interrelationship of sacrificial and textual, as well as cosmic and social, process. I will further suggest that the orientation to the past in the Mahābhārata provides prompts and clues as to how it might be transmitted and adapted by its performers and audiences. This argument can be substantiated with a case study.

We shall take as an example the case of the tragic history of Karṇa. The birth of Karṇa is narrated in detail in the Āraṇyakaparvan96 as part of the story of how Indra begged the earrings and armour of the semi-divine Karṇa from him in order to help neutralise his threat to the great Pāṇḍava warrior Arjuna. Unbeknownst to either party is the fact of Karṇa being the elder brother of the five Pāṇḍavas. Karṇa is the son of the sun (Surya). His mother Kuntī had obtained a boon such that she could conjure up any god. Her first youthful experiment with this newfound power ended in the birth of the glorious Karṇa, just as her subsequent use of the power had the consequence of the birth of three boys (Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma and Arjuna) to herself and twins to her co-wife

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96 Mbh 3.284–94.
Mādrī (Nakula and Sahadeva), these being the five Pāṇḍavas (‘sons’ of King Pāṇḍu). As a maiden, Kuntī felt unable to keep the baby Karna and instead decided to abandon him, floating him in a basket down the river Aśva. He was found by the sūta, charioteer, Adhiratha who adopted him and brought him up ignorant of his semi-divine kṣatriya origins. Karna leads a somewhat complicated life: much of it is taken up with the gathering of armaments with which to defeat the Pāṇḍavas. This is because he is the close friend and confidant of the Kaurava prince Duryodhana, who is the sworn enemy of the five sons of Pāṇḍu. Having been told of his birth in the Āraṇyakaparvan we hear an account of his past from his own mouth in the Karṇaparvan. At this point in the main plot of the Mahābhārata, Karna is generalissimo of the Kaurava forces and locked in horrific combat with the Pāṇḍavas on the field of the Kurus, kurukṣetra. We hear, among other things, of his cursing by the Bhargava brāhmaṇa Rāma. Karna had entered the great warrior brāhmaṇa’s service under false pretences in order to obtain knowledge of terrible missile weapons (astra). While his preceptor was sleeping on his lap Karna’s thigh (ūru) is pierced (bheda) by a slender and variegated worm (kīta). Karna endured the terrible pain and did not disturb Rāma. However, when Rāma awoke and saw what had happened he immediately recognised that such a capacity to endure physical pain was the mark of the kṣatriya and not the brāhmaṇa. He curses Karna to forget the use of the missile weapon (astra) he has taught him when he needs it most.

A re-telling of this tale occurs in the Śāntiparvan. Nārada, however, goes into considerably more descriptive detail, most especially in relation to the worm (kṛmi):

The worm delighted in phlegm (śleshman), flesh (mānsa) and blood (śoṇita) as food […] (He had) eight feet (aṣṭa-pāda), sharp teeth (ṭikṣṇa-damśtra) and he was covered in needle (sūci) like hair (roma), his limbs were drawn up, Alarka was his name.

We are granted a comprehensive vision of this foul worm as if to focus the attention of the audience for the subsequent narrative expansion of his role. The narrative continues with a history of the cursing of that worm. The worm explains that he had formerly been a great asura (mahāsura) and that he had been cursed for ravishing the spouse of the great sage Bhrigu. The term of the curse was to last until the destruction of his worm-form at the hands of Rāma, descendant of Bhrigu.

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97 Mbh 8.29. The incident of the worm is at Mbh 8.29.4–7.
98 Mbh 8.29.5
99 Mbh 12.3.
100 Mbh 12.3.6a and 12.3.13:
   atha kṛmiḥ śleṣmaṁaya māṁsaśoṇītaḥbhoganaḥ
   and
   aṣṭapāḍaṁ tiṅṣṭadaiṁṣṭraṁ sūcibhir iva sāṅvṛtam
   romabbiḥ sāṁniruddhāṁgam alarkaṁ nāma nāmaṁtaḥ
Let us consider the way in which narrative time is used in this sequence of narrations that span the Aranya, Kaiṣṭha and Śānti parvans. The details of Kaiṣṭha’s past are always addressed situationally in relation to a given narrative ‘present.’ As we saw, his birth is narrated in the context of Indra’s plot to steal from him the earrings and armour given to him by his father, the sun. Janamejaya asks Vaiśampāyana of the origins of the armour not of Kaiṣṭha. In our second text, Kaiṣṭha narrates some of the salient points in his personal history in order to gain the confidence of his deliberately critical charioteer Śalya. Nārada’s recounting of the life and deeds of Kaiṣṭha in the opening of the Śāntiparvan occurs in the context of the post-mortem revelation of his identity as the senior brother of the Pāṇḍavas at the close of the Śrīparvan. We thus have a series of three context-dependent narrations that ‘back-form’ the past from the narrative present. This stands as something of a ‘prompt’ to encourage further such narrations. That is to say, the significant past is constructed as that which impacts upon the present and that which is to be selectively explored from that present. Furthermore, Nārada, as a subsequent teller of the tale, elaborates and extends it. This structure mirrors that of the encompassing narratives of the entire text in which the Mahābhārata is itself narrated as an exploration of the significant past of Śāunaka (who calls for, and emphasises, Bhargava agency in the great Bhārata) and Janamejaya (the lineal descendant of the Pāṇḍavas). More than this, it implicitly models a means of exploring the past for readers and hearers of the text, as the implication of the accumulating narrations is one of the capacity for almost any given detail of the main narrative to be explored. All these processes act in combination with the order of narration in the Sanskrit text: In which the narrative activity moves from a direct pupil of the author to a direct descendant of the protagonists of the main plot; to one of a professional story-teller (a sūta) to the head of a prominent Brahmin lineage (of Bhṛgu). This shift widens the range of potential participants considerably and allows for the extrapolation of a widening circle of addressees. This order of narration thus succeeds in acting as a narrative mirror of the transmission of the text in time amongst individuals further and further removed from the events of the main narrative. Even as this occurs, there is a reciprocal movement in which the text plunges deeper and deeper into the details of the past. The matter is more complex even than this, however.

If we move from the birth of Kaiṣṭha to details of his life and to the details of the life of the worm that bored into his thigh, a certain structure begins to reveal itself. This form of the narrative construction of the significant past is one of recursive elaboration. A character is introduced: details of his life are described: the details of the details are described. By the time this has occurred, we are sensitised to a process of the repetition of a core narrative strategy. The past is thus opened to potentially endless exploration.102

101 **Mbh** 3.287.1.
102 That this may have, to an extent, become a feature of the art of poetic composition evinced in the Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa can be seen in M. Brockington, ‘The Art of Backwards Composition: Some Narrative Techniques in Vālmiki’s Rāmāyaṇa,’ in *Composing a Tradition: Concepts, Techniques and*
This is, I would argue, is characteristic of the model of discourse surrounding the significant past that we find in the Mahābhārata. As one moves backward from one narration to another one can continue to elaborate potentially ad infinitum. This is itself reflective of the Vedic ritual and particularly the sattra. In his Ritual and Mantra, Staal notes that it is the sattra rituals which are most amenable to indefinite expansion and which were recognised as such by early Indian commentators to a proverbial degree. Patañjali refers, in his Mahābhāṣya, to sattra rituals in a comparison developed to express the creativity of natural language:

There are indeed linguistic expressions that are never used [...]. Even though they are not used, they have of necessity to be laid down by rules just like protracted sattras.103

Thus the Vedic soma ritual which provides the context for both the encompassing narratives of the Mahābhārata, and which is performed solely for the benefit of its participants (rather than for a patron), is one that provides a model of potentially endless structural expansion.104 This allows us to see something of the interpretive range of the Mahābhārata as a means of churning the kathā-ayta. The three texts concerning Karna I have selected do not occur in the same parvan, neither are they explicitly interrelated by the interlocutors of the various encompassing narratives. They represent, instead, the progressive elaboration of the past of Karna and the details of that past even down to those beings, like the worm whose appearance is barely even a cameo.

This ‘sacrificial’ understanding of the past is reflected in the account of the death of Karna, in which we find an expression of some of the most prominent comparative threads of the text:

Thus this destruction (kṣaya) occurred when Karna and Arjuna clashed (sam-āgama). Even as Indra slew Vṛtra and Rāma slew Rāvana, even as Kṛṣṇa slew Mura, stuck down in battle [...] even as Skanda slew Mahiṣa and Rudra slew Andhaka [...] Arjuna slew, O king, in a...
chariot duel (dvairatha), a fierce battle (yuddha-durmada) with all his kinsmen, Karna best of warriors.105

Texts of this kind make of the past an elaborate network of bandhu-like connections. Even the use of the particle yathā here reflects the precise mode of establishing connections in the Brāhmaṇas; characters and events become, to an extent, pratinās (reflections) of one another. In this way, both Vedic ritual forms and Vedically derived strategies of interpretation recur both in the accounts of the origin of divine and human kingship and in the structure of the approach to the significant past itself. This form of elaboration of the past is not an isolated occurrence in the Mahābhārata.106 The details of Bhīṣma’s birth, the circumstances surrounding the deeply anomalous fact of Princess Draupadī’s five husbands, the absence of Kṛṣṇa from the dicing game in the Sabhāparvan—all these and more are subject to a process of narrative inflation and elaboration of the significant past that resonates with the

105 Mbh 8.4.51b–53a and 54:
evaṁ eṣa kṣaya vr̥ttaḥ karnājrūnasamāgama
mahendreṇa yathā vṛtro yathā rāmeṇa rāvaṇaḥ
yathā kṛṣṇena nihato muro ranaṁpiṭṭaḥ
kārtavīyaḥ ca rāmeṇa bhārgavaṇa hato yathā
tathārūjena nihato dvairatye yuddhadurmacaḥ
sāmāṭayabāndhavo rājan karnaḥ praharatāṁ varaḥ
and 8.4.53, star passage (illustrating further elaboration):
8*21.1: yathā skandena mahiṣo yathā rudreṇa cāndhakaḥ

106 The narrative elaboration of the past is marked and continuous. The circumstances and causes of the birth of Bhīṣma are narrated at Mbh 1.191–4 and traced back to the fault of the Vasus. The polyandrous union of Draupadī and the Pāṇḍava brothers is explained through three narratives of quite different causes, one of them suggesting that it was the result of an ardent girl’s repeated implorings of Śiva for a husband (five times and hence five husbands) at Mbh 1.157, another as a result of Indra’s offence of Śiva at Mbh 1.189 and the third as a result of a declaration by Kunī at Mbh 1.182. Kṛṣṇa’s absence from the dicing is explained at 3.15–23 in the Saubavadha Upākhyāna. There are many more examples. At Mbh 1.101, the chief advisor at the Kuru court Vidura has his birth history related in terms of a taking birth of Dharma himself (which itself is subject to its own peculiar history). The earrings stolen in the course of the narrative concerning the death of Parikṣit (Mbh 1.36–40) are discussed again in the Uttanka Upākhyāna at Mbh 14.52. The birth and life of Droṇa, the martial instructor of the Pāṇḍavas, is examined in detail and has links to the birth of Draupadī and her brother Dhṛṣṭadyumna from the sacrificial fire (so that the latter might aid their father, King Drupada, in pursuit of his vendetta against Droṇa). See Mbh 1.121, 122 and 153–5. There is also elaboration of the past in terms of the similarity of plight; this is the way in which, for example, the story of the Rāmāyaṇa is introduced as a subordinate narration in the Mahābhārata (Mbh 3.257–76), when Yudhīśvara asks his recurrent question at Mbh 3.257.10: Is there any man less fortunate than I, one that you might have seen before (drṣṭapūrva) or even heard (śrutapūrva) before?

astī núnam mayā kaścidalpabhāgyatara naraḥ
bhavatā drṣṭapūrva vā śrutapūrva āpi vā bhavet

An almost identical question is also the stimulus for the narration of the famous story of Nala. See Mbh 3.49.34.
structure of the recursive Vedic ritual and its attendant analogical competencies. Malamoud summarises the matter very well when he says:

A frequent, nearly automatic, analogy found in the Brahmanism of ancient India maintains that any activity, whether human or divine, possessed of a measure of complexity [...] ought to be analysed as a sacrifice—that is, one ought to recognise in it the same persons, ingredients, interplay of forces, arrangements, and the superimposition of meanings that characterise the sacrificial scenario.107

Bearing this in mind, we are now in a position to provide something of an overview of the multiple ‘temporalities’ of the Mahābhārata. The text engages in a narrative construction of the past that moves from the multiple narrative ‘presents’ backwards into the infinitely expandable narrative terrain of potentially significant and interrelated events in the past. This is a figure of backwards expansion that is combined with a reciprocal and equally expansive movement forward in time that is implicit in the order of narration in the Sanskrit text. 108 This is an order of narration that, as we have seen, is marked by the diversification of its key interlocutors as we move through its encompassing narratives (from a direct pupil of the author to a professional bard). All of this is undertaken in the context of a complex strategy of the encompassment of Vedic ritual functions in the Mahābhārata which was the subject of the analyses of the previous section.109 This ‘encompassing’ narrative exegesis focuses, in particular, on the roles and functions of ritual and textual activity and the necessity of the assumption of the role of stabilising agent at the levels of both gods and human beings. The

107 C. Malamoud, Cooking the World, 162.

108 It is also important to note that the arguments of this paper concerning strategies of narration and the significant past also relate to general questions pertaining to lower criticism in the Sanskrit Mahābhārata. The complex narrative unfolding of the Mahābhārata is reflected in, amongst other things, the shift from textus simplicior to textus ornatior in the manuscript tradition of the text. This has been borne out at the most general level by my extensive use of the, generally considered as ‘late,’ Śāntiparvan and my use of star and appendicised passages from the critical edition of the Mahābhārata in this paper. The idea that the expansion of a given text can be the result of its internal narrative structure and not solely extra-textual issues of transmission and adaptation (or perhaps better that these two dimensions of communicative practice are in dialogue), while acceptable in the study of oral tradition, is one that is under-emphasised in the study of written Sanskrit texts. These developmental considerations have been neatly encapsulated by Sheldon Pollock as the ‘ontology of interpolation’ (and elegantly developed by Laurie Patton in whose work the phrase appears) (see L. Patton, Myth as Argument, 13). Patton glosses this as a process of engaging with a given text ‘as a series of choices and investments by motivated authors’ (ibid., 13).

109 What is offered is a particular mode of considering the past in relation to the present. This has implications as a model of textual transmission and is, to an extent, reflected in the recurrence of key Mahābhārata interlocutors and places of narration in later Purānic literature (see G Bonazzoli, ‘Places of Purānic Recitation According to the Purāṇas,’ Purāṇa 23 (1981): 48–59). I am not simply arguing for the evocation of an oral context but rather a very developed model of a form of narrative practice which draws on the inter-referential and analogic Vedic/ brāhmaṇic competencies but does so in such a way that the model becomes amenable to application in pursuit of radically anti-Vedic/ brāhmaṇic goals. This has historical, ideological and theological ramifications which remain largely unexplored in this paper.
multiple narrativisations of ritual practice in the Mahābhārata thus push the Vedic conceptual order into a highly creative engagement with wider social life.\(^{110}\) Indeed, social life is brought into the orbit of Vedic constructivism. Patton’s work is, again, instructive:

any study of exegetical totalization […] must take into account the vast, encyclopaedic nature of such projects […] used to show the infinite applicability of canon to human situations.\(^{111}\)

This is to say, returning to our introduction, that the Mahābhārata is ideally structured to act as an application of narrative theory in early South Asian religious discourse. It presents hypotheses about the world, about the ritual origins of cosmos and the dependence of creation on textual activity, as well as its own discourse, in the elaborate examinations of key events and characters within the text, combined with a paradigm to explain or encourage further interpretation of these phenomena, in which a range of core Vedic interpretive competencies are deployed. These competencies centre on an assumption of the creative function of ritual practice and the concomitant competence in establishing connections (bandhu) between different orders and levels of ritually derived being.

**Conclusions**

My paper began by posing a basic question: ‘How do social groups constitute ideas and events in the past as significant and in relationship to what presuppositions and what other forms of discourse or practice?’ My analyses focused on narrative approaches to the past in early South Asia as a mode of exegetical and theoretical practice in relation to pre-existing forms of social knowledge (rather than as a form of ‘failed’ or at least ‘inadequate’ historiography). In the specific case of the Mahābhārata, I demonstrated a narrative construction of the significant past that pursued an agenda of faithfulness to certain core Vedic ritual conceptions of the nature of cosmic and social action, but which preserved a restless capacity for innovation and commentary in relation to these core postulates and practices. In particular, I

\(^{110}\) This paper does not take up the radical emphasis on contingency in the Mahābhārata. This can be seen in the description of the complex and often problematic genealogies of its key protagonists and furthermore in the recurrent emphasis on the interruption of sacrifice (or when it is completed, its often ambivalent aftermath), as well as through its broad foregrounding of the uncertain outcomes of war and the pursuit of revenge (which Malamoud calls the ‘opposite of sacrifice,’ see Cooking the World, 163). Almost everything, from reproductive to sacrificial processes, as well as much else besides, is called into question. The Mahābhārata’s approach to the past subverts the very authority it seeks to claim for itself repeatedly. Like the interrupted, or horrifically successful, sacrifices with which the Mahābhārata concerns itself, the text evokes a model of practice in order to push it to its very limits and beyond. This remains a topic for further research.

\(^{111}\) L. Patton, Myth as Argument, 442 (my italics).
considered the way in which the Mahābhārata extends the edifice of Vedic ritual constructivism to encompass other forms of textual activity. In this way, the Mahābhārata both employs and adapts pre-existing modes of religious thought and practice. In addition to this, I considered the way in which the Mahābhārata establishes an approach to the past which allows, potentially, for its endless extension and adaptation. Taken together, these features of the Mahābhārata’s approach to the significant past allow the text to both ‘debate’ the past and, more than this, debate the nature and function of ritual and textual activity in post-Vedic contexts. In this way, I demonstrated that the Mahābhārata is heavily invested in a process of encompassing the functions, competencies and capacities of the Vedas. This is achieved both by transposing their ‘intrinsic technologies’ (in this case the pressing of the soma/amṛta), and by the recurrent ‘tactic’ of historically contextualising (and thus ‘concretising’) their ritual activities in a complex network of narratives and narrative practice. The ‘effect’ that was thus transmitted was both the applicability of Vedic forms of practice and analysis to extra-ritual contexts and the possibility of, and indeed emphasis upon, the recapitulation of Vedic knowledge (and access to its attendant potencies) in alternate forms.

These aspects of the Mahābhārata must, in turn, take their place in the analysis of wider forms of Vedic exegesis and religious and social change in early South Asia. Such an analysis must seek to integrate a wide variety of textual and historical developments in the context of what Sheldon Pollock has termed the ‘Sanskrit Cosmopolis.’ This is Pollock’s designation for the full range of dominant ‘cultural–political practices’ (which encompasses intellectual traffic, temple building, city planning, and geographical nomenclature) which, taken together, characterise knowledge and state formation in South and South East Asia in the first millennium of the common era. Pollock suggests that the spread of ‘political Sanskrit’ in this period is ‘without parallel in world history.’ He goes on to state:

No organised political power such as the Roman imperium was involved. No colonization of South India or Southeast Asia can be shown to have occurred […]. Sanskrit was not diffused by any single, unified, scripture-based religion impelled by religious revolution or new revelation […]. Sanskrit never functioned as a link language like other transregional codes such as Greek, Latin, Arabic […]. In fact, nothing indicates that in this period Sanskrit was an everyday medium of communication anywhere […].

112 From the etymologies of the Nirukta to the explanations and narratives of the Brhaddevatā, from the Mimāṃsā and Dharmaśītric development of the dharma concept, to the status claims of the Nātyaśāstra and the magical cross-applications of Vedic language in the Vidyāśāstra literature, from Upaniṣadic speculation, to Jaina and Buddhist discourse on the nature of sacrifice and the true brāhmaṇa, and much else besides.


114 Ibid., 12.

115 Ibid.

116 Ibid.
For Pollock, the Sanskrit Cosmopolis is ‘periphery without centre, community
without unity’ and is dependent on Sanskrit as an ‘aesthetic practice.’ What Pollock
does here, however, is describe, but not explain, the essence of the Sanskrit and
Sanskritically derived knowledge systems of early South and South East Asia. In fact,
and I base my inference on my analyses of the relation of the *Mahābhārata* to earlier
forms of religious discourse, the origins of the ‘Sanskrit Cosmopolis’ might lie in
‘hermeneutic’ rather than in strictly ‘aesthetic’ practice.

The ‘Sanskrit Cosmopolis’ must be ‘explained,’ or at least explored, as an
outgrowth of the basic presuppositions, institutions and practices described and
analysed in the Vedic corpus (and the varied exegetical trajectories to which they gave
rise). By this, I am suggesting that that which facilitated the spread of forms of
religiously and politically empowered Sanskritic knowledge in the first millennium of
the common era was the powerful cross-application to extra-ritual contexts of
fundamentally Vedic practices, competencies and self-understandings. Chief amongst
these were the obsession with generative rule systems and an overarching hermeneutic
of hierarchy and resemblance. Such broad contentions have by no means been proven
by the analyses of this paper. It was my intention, however, that my characterisation of
the *Mahābhārata*’s relation to the Vedic corpus should contribute to this analysis of
the ‘mechanisms,’ ‘categories’ and presuppositions of post-Vedic early South
Asian religious discourse.

My analyses, then, have shown how the shift from ‘discourse of ritual’ to
‘discourse of power’ in early South Asia is both indexed and shaped by the
*Mahābhārata*’s construction of the significant past. This ‘codification of historical
memory’ is allied to a discourse on sovereignty and narrative practice that provides a
dynamic demonstration of the assumption of ritual power by alternate institutions and
textual forms in early South Asia. This research must be developed in relation to
further and deeper analyses of forms and modes of governance and social change in
South, and even South-East, Asia in this period. The impact of the north-east Indian
heterodoxies (Jaina and Buddhist) and wider socio-linguistic issues (which are most
clearly indexed by the passage of the Prākrits from languages of royal decree and
sophisticated protest to the objects of dramatic scorn in this period) must also be
assessed. Such analyses must proceed with a degree of caution in regard to the

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117 Ibid., 15.
118 I draw these terms from a comment made by Sheldon Pollock on the discursive domination of
forms of Sanskrit knowledge in early South Asia: ‘what we lack (is) an analysis of its mechanisms, its
categories, the ways in which its is constructed and works.’ See ‘From Discourse of Ritual to
Discourse of Power,’ 333.
Banarsidass, 1993, 15. For the growing dominance of Sanskrit in the epigraphic record in the early
common era in South Asia, see R. Thapar, *The Past and Prejudice*, Delhi: Government Publications,
1973, 51.
received vocabularies of distinctive ‘cultures’ in this period from ‘Brahminical’ and ‘Buddhist’ to ‘Mauryan’ and ‘Guptan.’

So also must our genre typologies, and characterisations of the range and forms of early South Asian expressive practice, move beyond current modes of categorisation as myth, manual or philosophy. The lack of comprehension of the origins and principals of the prominence, indeed dominance, of the ‘Sanskrit Cosmopolis’ might then be revealed to be, at least partially, a product of the very theoretical categories that we bring to bear on the subject matter itself.

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Secondary Sources


\footnote{Other than, of course, as heuristic tools.}


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